

## **Even Outdoor RPGs in the Sun have Rules! by christah88**

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**Genre:** F/M, Gen

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**Summary:**

One part D&D, one part adolescent summertime freedom, two parts hanging with the best crew in town, and a heaping helping of childhood nostalgia.

Pairings: Mike x Eleven, Lucas x Max, Dustin x sugar (and later, x revenge), Everyone x sunglasses

## 1. Chapter 1

### Author's Note:

My chapters typically grow to unmanageable lengths, so I'm posting this before it gets too unruly. Please comment if you enjoy!

"There is no way we should be stuck inside in Mike's dingy basement on a day like today, no matter how much you nerds like playing D&D," Max declared.

"Hey," the boys chorused as one, then-

"D&D appeals to all kinds of people, once they open their brains enough to give it a chance," Lucas said-

"Would a nerd have this kind of style?" Dustin gave his curls a shake-

"My mom made me clean the basement just last week!" Mike protested.

"I agree," Will nodded seriously, then looked around at the others, now shooting him matching glares of betrayal. "I just mean, we really should go outside once in awhile, you guys," he pointed out reasonably. "There's not even any natural light down here," he flicked his wrist at the few windows set high on the walls, the shades pulled low.

"It is a bit like 'Creature from the Black Lagoon' down here," Dustin mused, raising an eyebrow at the drawn shades. "Why so dark, Mike?" he asked.

Mike's eyes darted to the drawn shades, then around the room, falling on Eleven where she curled, toes tucked underneath her, against an arm of the couch. El crooked a smile at him, then pressed her nose into her stuffed E.T, eyes bright.

"Uhm," Mike coughed, two twin spots rising high on his cheeks, "it's not that dark down here," he protested lamely.

“Please,” Max rolled her eyes. “We could turn off the lights and we wouldn’t be able to see two feet in front of ourselves.”

“Yeah,” Lucas piped up, “and, if we were quiet enough, anyone opening the door from the kitchen wouldn’t be able to tell we were down here.” He wiggled his eyebrows suggestively.

“Interesting,” Dustin drawled, turning an inquiring look on El on the couch and then back to Mike at his usual seat behind the table on the other end of the room. “Well, well, well, Mike and El... what *have* you two been doing down here in the dark?”

“Nothing!” Mike exclaimed-

“Playing,” El said at the same time.

Mike choked and stared at the table.

“*Playing*,” Max repeated, delighted. Anyone could see that Mike would give no quarter, so she turned on El, lifting one eyebrow in question. “Did Mike tell you it’s more fun to play Hide-and-Seek in the dark, El?” she asked, honey on her tongue. “Oh, sweets, you don’t have to believe everything he tells you-”

“Oh my god!” Mike protested, voice hot with indignation, while the other boys snickered. “I did not-”

“Yeah, El,” Dustin chimed in, “just because Mike like to play Part-to-Part with the lights off, doesn’t mean-” he was cut off by Mike’s yell of outrage, fingers scrabbling dangerously at his thick curls.

“Part-to-Part?” Eleven repeated, eyes wide.

They turned as one to look at her blinking up at them innocently from her private corner on the couch, and dissolved into glee. (Except for Mike, of course, who crossed his arms and tilted a very put-upon look at his friends.)

“Part-to-Part?” Dustin mimicked between giggles.

El narrowed her eyes at him.

“Sorry,” he said quickly, lifting his hands in appeasement. “I mock with love, you know that,” but, all the same, he smothered his chuckles into submission and turned to the others with a smirk. “Who wants to explain Mike’s favorite game to Eleven?” he asked. Mike huffed and rolled his eyes.

“Part-to-Part is a camp game,” Will said after a short pause, eyes flicking between El and the others. “You play it with a group of people. Everyone runs around until the referee calls, like, hand-to-hand, or knee-to-elbow,” Max snorted, “and then you have to find a partner and make the connection- and the last pair to, uh, make the part-to-part is out.” El furrowed her brow. “And then, you just keep playing until there is only one pair left, and they win.” Will shrugged.

“Fun,” El said noncommittally. She twisted E.T’s foot around her finger a few times, then asked, “but why would Mike and I play Part-to-Part alone?”

“Why indeed,” Dustin pumped his eyebrows while Lucas snorted and Mike groaned.

“Oh,” El said suddenly, squinting at E.T. She looked up and caught Mike’s eye. “Ooooh,” she said again, her face lighting up, a huge smile breaking across her face.

Mike felt his lip quirk in spite of himself, even while his discomfort burned in his stomach.

“No,” El turned back to the others and shook her head, “we weren’t doing that,” she said seriously, and then, in an undertone, “not on purpose.”

They stared at her in shock.

“Did El just make a joke?” Lucas asked the room at large.

She brought E.T. up to her nose and giggled.

“Funny,” she said and pointed E.T’s long finger at herself.

Dustin laughed in pure delight. He crossed the room and plopped himself down on the couch next to Eleven. He held his hand out for

the stuffed toy, then turned him around to point at her.

“Eleven make joke,” he said in E.T.’s alien monotone, then turned to Mike. “Friends laugh at Mike. Mike sad.”

“Mike sad?” El repeated, growing concerned. She looked from E.T. to Mike and back. “Why Mike sad?” her eyes were wide.

“Because El make joke at Mike’s expense,” Dustin continued before Mike could say anything.

“Mike’s- expense?” El repeated, lost but agitated.

“Mike not sad,” Mike said quickly, then shook his head, irritated. “I mean, *I’m* not sad,” he corrected himself. He met her eyes across the room. “Don’t worry,” he told her. Her shoulders relaxed. She crooked him a questioning smile. He smiled back.

“Oh god,” Dustin groaned, looking between them. “I’m sitting right here, you guys,” he said and pretended to barf in his hands.

“Alright,” Mike slapped his hands on the table and stood up. “Let’s just- let’s go outside, okay?” he suggested. Max and Will cheered. “And maybe we could all, like, take it easy on Mike for once, huh?”

“Aw, poor Mike’s getting picked on,” Lucas sniffed, grabbing his bag and stuffing his assortment of prop guns, figurines, snacks and sunglasses back inside (somehow they’d been scattered to all corners of the floor within the first three minutes he’d sat down). He slung his bag over his shoulder, then made to kick up Max’s skateboard before she stopped him with a scalding look.

“It’s not like Mike’s spent hours putting together the next campaign for all of you or anything,” Mike grumbled, sliding his papers carefully into the binder and setting it aside sadly.

“I’m sorry, Mike,” Max turned to him, skateboard tucked under her arm. “The last one was kickass, you know I loved it, but we have to get you boys outside more.” She gave him a critical once-over. “You’re so pale, you should be that elf character you made for Eleven- Evenstar the Fair- in the next game.”

Lucas snorted.

Mike threw up his hands and gave her an incredulous look.

“Didn’t I just say, ‘let’s take it easy on Mike’?” he demanded.

“Yes,” El said, standing up and giving them all the eye. “Mike is very pretty.”

Their friends laughed and filed out the back door, shaking their heads in amusement.

“Was that not what you wanted?” El asked him quietly, trailing the group. “I thought you meant- ‘take it easy,’ like, ‘be nice to you,’ right?”

Mike twisted a smile at her, ears still red. “Thank you,” he murmured back, holding the door open for her. “I always like it when you’re nice to me,” he told her.

She shuffled a few steps backward so she could keep looking at him while he locked the door behind them. “But that’s not what you meant?” she asked, still confused.

“No, that’s pretty much what I meant,” he said.

“But-” El continued, “they laughed-”

“Yeah, well,” Mike shrugged, unconcerned now that the others were walking their bikes up the hill, attention focused elsewhere. He tucked his hands in his pockets and nudged her with his elbow. “You don’t really call boys ‘pretty,’” he explained. “Girls are pretty.”

“Oh,” El said, trying not to be frustrated with herself. She pulled her bike (Hopper had refused to get her a pink one, like she’d asked, so she’d been forced to tie glittery gold streamers to the handles) from the side of the house and dragged it up the hill beside her. “So what are boys?”

Mike thought about that. “Cute, I guess,” he said. He remembered Nancy using that word multiple times on the phone in previous years. “Or, well, good-looking.”

“Good-looking,” El mused, stopping at the top of the hill. “That’s boring,” she said.

Mike laughed. “I hadn’t thought about it before,” he said, “but it is kind of boring.”

“Handsome!” El suddenly remembered, looking at him victoriously. “I heard that in a movie,” she told him.

“Very good,” he said approvingly, unconsciously leaning closer to her over her bike.

“Mike,” she said through her eyelashes. “I meant to say you are very handsome.”

His throat tightened, stomach fluttering. “Oh,” he said, heat rising up his neck again. “Thank you,” he managed to say without spluttering.

“And your bike is very handsome, too,” El said, casting an envious glance over his new wheels. His parents had upgraded him to an adult-sized bike for his thirteenth birthday, since his knees had started killing him on his old one. It was dark blue with a few bright yellow racing stripes, and it was a rather attractive bike, if he did say so himself. “Not like mine,” El continued, looking dispiritedly down at her own bike with scratched silver paint and thin tires. “Mine is bad-looking.”

“But you put these on it,” he pointed out, running his fingers lightly through her gold streamers. “Now it’s pretty- like you.”

She smiled up at him. The sun beamed down on them in a bright blue sky.

“Mike! El!” Dustin screamed at them from down the road. “Stop making out with each other already and *let’s go!*”

They hopped to attention and kicked their legs over.

“Do you want to put E.T. in my bag?” Mike offered, holding out his hand.

She nodded and passed him over. “M.J,” she corrected him, raising

her brow.

Mike huffed a laugh and zipped his bag. "Right," he said, gesturing her ahead of him. "M.J."

They stretched their legs to catch up to their friends, turning their wheels toward the overgrown baseball diamond near Mirkwood.

## 2. Chapter 2

### Notes for the Chapter:

I am likin' this whole short chapters thing!

“Let’s play charades,” Will suggested, leaning back on his hands in the grass.

“We’re outside, Will,” Max argued. “The whole point of being outside it to, like, do outside-stuff!”

Will shrugged. “So, we’ll make every clue have to do with being outside,” he said.

“We could play Hide-and-Seek,” Dustin said, but had no chance to explain his reasoning because Lucas promptly cut him off with an incredulous,

“Hide-and-Seek is for babies, Dustin!”

“Not the way Mike and El play it,” Dustin rejoined (predictably). Mike shook his head, aggrieved.

“Look!” El called, pointing straight up from her reclined position on the haphazardly-mown grass. They turned and squinted against the sun to see a low-hanging plane gleam through the bluebird sky, the roar of its engine catching their ears some seconds later.

“Did you hear that?” she asked, turning her head in the grass with a bewildered look. “Why did it sound like the plane went over after it was already gone?”

“Well, first you have to understand the concept of the speed of light,” Mike said, plopping down on the ground next to her, “and then, we can talk about the speed of sound.” El widened her eyes and nodded beatifically while Mike pulled a dandelion from the ground and gestured impressively, though Max privately thought El tended to tune him out in favor of staring at him while he explained the larger points of life to her.

“Ugh,” Max groaned, turning to the others. “How have you survived so far from the beach?” she wondered. She unstuck her hair from the back of her neck and piled it on the top of her head. “Don’t you ever feel... you know, *trapped*, in all these cornfields? You people need a body of water in Hawkins, stat.”

“We have water in Hawkins-” Will pointed out.

“Oh man, we should take Max to the quarry!” Dustin’s eyes grew bright with excitement. He rounded on Lucas. “I can’t *believe* we haven’t taken her there yet, we are really slacking in our ‘welcome to Hawkins new person of our party’ duties- and the quarry is by *far* one of the coolest places we have to offer-” He stopped abruptly, squinting between the twin guilty looks on Max and Lucas’ faces. “Why are you two looking at me like that?”

“Like what?” Lucas demanded, an unconvincing twist to his lips.

“Like you forgot to tell me my grammy died, and by the way, you accidentally switched the orange juice for lighter fluid when you brought her breakfast last week?” Dustin glared between them, growing agitated.

“I’ve already been to the quarry,” Max told him, extremely interested in picking at her fingernails.

“Aw, you have?” Dustin asked, disappointed. “Oh, well, that’s okay, you can’t have found the best places to go on your first visit- there’s this one spot, if you lean over just right, you can spit and watch the wind take it down down the cliffside and land in a little ripple right in the center of the pond...” he trailed off, a wistful light in his eyes.

“She’s been there,” Lucas said shortly, wishing this conversation could be over already.

“Uh, what?” Dustin looked at him, bewildered. “How could she have? We spent *years* finding that spot- measuring the angles, checking the winds, calculating the perfect velocity. There is *no way* someone could find that rock and spit off it just right on their first time!” He put his hands on his hips in exasperation.

“I have found the promised rock,” Max declared, lifting her hands to the heavens, “and I have seen my spit fly with the grace of god, praise the lord!”

Will laughed, which was nice, because nobody else did. Dustin and Lucas gave her semi-confused, semi-not-really-paying-attention glances, then turned back to each other.

“Lucas,” Dustin said deliberately, “how did Max find our super special- and *secret*- spitting rock at the quarry on her own?”

Sweat dripped down Lucas’ temples. “She- she- she made me take her!” His eyes flicked briefly to Max, and then he leaned in close to Dustin’s space and lowered his voice. “You know how scary she can be-”

“Hey!” Max’s eyes widened dangerously, her red hair crackling with outrage.

“See what I mean?” Lucas shuffled behind Dustin and cowered.

“Oh no,” Dustin stepped away, “you are not getting out of this that easily-”

“Dustin,” Max sighed, “I’m sorry we didn’t all go together. Lucas was just trying to make me feel better earlier this spring when, you know- my dad called to say he was bailing on my summer visit,” she kicked at the ground irritably, “and I was being a real ass about it-”

“She was,” Lucas nodded in agreement.

“-saying that Hawkins was going to suck compared to California in the summertime,” she cast him a dirty look, “that I literally could not be further from the beach if I tried- that Hawkins was a podunk town full of hick losers-”

“Hey!” Dustin and Will said together.

“-so Lucas told me to shut up and follow him, and then he took me to the quarry and to the spitting rock-” her eyes softened in memory, “and it was glorious, Dustin, it really was- I couldn’t believe how far my spit flew-”

“Right?” Dustin grew excited. “I swear, some kind of otherworldly force exists on that rock-”

“So, anyway, it made me feel better about staying here all summer, knowing that there are places like the quarry to explore,” Max shrugged, “and, you know, it hasn’t been *that* bad so far, all things considering...”

Dustin squinted at her. “Because you loooooooove us,” he sang unexpectedly, then stepped his sneakers right up to Max’s toes and shimmied in her face. “Maxine loves her hick loser friends, oh yeah,” his rhythm grew jaunty, “Maxine is a Hawkins nerd now, oh yeah!”

“Ugh, you weirdo,” Max threw her head back in exasperation. “Who said you were allowed to sing?”

“The angels in heaven, baby,” he snapped a suave little turn, “they sent me amongst you mortals to share my rapturous gift.” Will and Lucas laughed at his antics. Max rolled her eyes, lips quirking upwards. “Just promise me one thing,” Dustin stopped, looking seriously between them. “Tell me you respected the sanctity of the spitting rock and that you didn’t, like, spend half your time there making out or something.”

Max and Lucas found it very difficult at that moment to look at each other. Will peered from the pair to Dustin and back again, as avidly as a spectator at a tennis match.

“Lucas!” Dustin exploded, turning on his friend in disgust. “How could you!” He demanded. “You *save* your *spit* for *spitting*,” he pounded his fist on his hand in emphasis and shook his head, extremely disappointed in his friend. “I’m surprised you even had any spit left-”

“Dustin!” Max squealed, cheeks burning.

“C’mon, man,” Lucas appealed to his friend. “I promise, there was, like, *no* tongue-”

“Lucas!” Max groaned, wishing the ground would open up and swallow her down, or better yet, leave her unharmed and take her

annoying friends away.

“Alright, alright,” Lucas held up his hands, “there was a *little* bit of tongue-”

“Oh my god,” Max pressed her palms to her forehead. “I am in hell.”

“Well, it’s no less than you deserve!” Dustin shook his finger at her. “Disrespecting the spitting rock that way-”

“What have I done,” Max asked the sky above, “to warrant such torment?”

“Give them a break, Dustin,” Will said. “They’re not that bad. At least they’re not...” he trailed off, and they all turned to look at the two remaining members of their party sprawled on the grass ten feet away at the very moment that Mike placed a ring of dandelions upon El’s temples.

“There,” they heard him murmur, eyes glassy, “I crown you the princess of the forest.” El tilted her head and fluttered her eyelashes in that way that quite predictably put a red splash on Mike’s cheekbones. He looked up to find the others staring at him with varying levels of nausea.

“What?” Mike said defensively.

“You disgust me,” Dustin shook his head in contempt.

“Hey!” El sprang to her feet, dandelions slipping down her forehead. “*Take it easy on Mike!*” She crossed her arms and glared at them. In lieu of any electricity within a half-mile radius, Max swore the winds swirled up a bit, snapping with the force of Eleven’s indignation.

Mike smirked at them over her shoulder.

“Sorry, Eleven,” Dustin said contritely, then stuck his tongue out at Mike as soon as she turned her back.

“C’mon guys,” Will piped up, “nobody else has thought of a game, so let’s play charades!”

“Hey, Will, guess who I am,” Lucas jumped up and ran in front of the group. He gave an over-enthusiastic wave and turned a dopey circle. He knelt in the grass with a slightly-crazed smile and picked a handful of dandelions.

Mike narrowed his eyes.

Lucas shuffled forward on his knees and prostrated himself at El’s feet. She looked at him curiously and accepted his offered dandelions with a confused smile. Lucas sobbed silently and clutched at her ankles.

Mike threw himself back on the ground while the others laughed. “Why couldn’t I be friends with Bradley Morris and Joe Griggs?” he wondered.

Lucas snorted and picked himself up, brushing his knees. “Sorry, Wheeler,” he said, “but you botched that one on your own. Rambling on about the quantum theory in relation to Star Wars- I *told* you that was a bad idea...”

“Worked on me,” Dustin said. Max snorted.

“Surprise, surprise,” she said drily.

El looked between them all, not quite following along but happy all the same.

“Alright, SERIOUSLY,” Will said, getting a little grumpy. “Is no one going to suggest a game?” he demanded. “What are we going to do all day?”

They looked at each other, stumped. Cicadas were heard buzzing in the nearby bushes.

“We could... play baseball?” Max suggested, looking around the overgrown diamond. She brushed a hand in the dirt to reveal a weather-beaten pitcher’s mound beneath her right leg.

They nodded together, considering this suggestion for a moment, then burst into laughter.

“Kidding, kidding!” Max wheezed, wiping at a stray tear.

“Good one, Max,” Lucas said, clapping her on the shoulder-

“Frightening *and* funny!” Dustin said approvingly, glancing from Max to El and back. “I tell you, these girls are the whole package-”

“As if you guys even know the rules to baseball,” she chuckled to herself-

“We played baseball in P.E. class- once- I think,” Will tried to protest, but trailed off, confused-

“You were sick that day,” Mike reminded him-

“Oh, yeah,” Will said, remembering, “that was the day I drew Timmy the Tall for the first time!”

“So,” El said, confused again, “are we going to play the base-ball?” she asked.

“No,” Dustin shook his head emphatically, “no we are not, El. And why are we not going to play baseball?”

“Because...” she pondered, her eyes lighting up a moment later, “you guys *suck* at it!”

Mike laughed.

“She speaks the truth,” Dustin said.

“Not me,” Lucas puffed up his chest. “Do you guys remember the time I struck out Derek Veith *and* Joe Griggs?”

They all groaned.

“I will *pay* you not to tell that story again,” Will announced.

“So,” El continued quickly to stop them from devolving into another argument, “if we’re not going to play base-ball,” she peered around at her friends, “what are we going to do?”

They paused, growing uneasy, the sun hot and snappy on their necks.

They had a real dilemma on their hands.

### 3. Chapter 3

#### Notes for the Chapter:

This is fun!! GIDDY-UP!

“I knew we should have stayed at my house and started on the new campaign,” Mike grumbled, throwing an arm over his eyes to shield them from the sun. Eleven sat cross-legged next to him, working on her fifth piece of dandelion jewelry for herself, having already forced a dandelion necklace on Mike, a tiara on Max, and bracelets on the other boys.

“Where’s your sense of adventure, man?” Lucas asked, digging through his backpack in search of-

“Oh, screw it,” he muttered to himself and upended the bag in the grass. His prized possessions- a few compasses, a map of Hawkins, his flip notepad (for very important note-taking), some stray lifesavers (“Score!” Dustin yelped, brushing off the fuzz and popping one in his mouth), a magnifying glass, a prop gun or two, and seven or eight pairs of sunglasses- tumbled down and scattered at his knees for his inspection.

“Nice,” Max huffed, swiping a gun and some shades. She holstered the gun and pushed the glasses up her nose, unfolding herself from the ground and sauntering around the group.

“Excuse me, sir,” she drawled at Mike and struck a pose, her dandelion tiara undermining her tough facade. “Looks like I’m going to have to take you in for excessive and reckless complaining.”

One of Mike’s eyes peered up at her from underneath his forearm.

“Ha, ha,” he groused.

She turned to El, whose fingers, arms, cheeks and nose were all dusted yellow. “Ma’am,” Max said, and then, “Ma’am,” a bit more obnoxiously when the other girl didn’t look up immediately. “Eleven, ma’am,” El finally paused from twisting two weeds together and

squinted at her, “I’m gonna have to ask you to put the dandelions down, ma’am,” Max gave her a stern look over the tops of her glasses.

“Dandelions- down?” El repeated, brow furrowing.

“That’s right, ma’am,” Max sidled closer, fingers in her belt loops. “It was alright at first, but now- two dandelion bracelets, three necklaces, and one crown is just too many. You’ve crossed a line, ma’am,” she unholstered her gun and spun it around her fingertips. “Don’t give me that look- I don’t make the laws, I just enforce ‘em.” She flipped the gun up in the air above her head and, “Yeeeeeee HAW!” she called-

The gun slipped between her fingers and landed at her feet. “Dammit,” Max muttered and stooped to pick it up.

Eleven looked sadly down at her pile of loose dandelions, a half-completed necklace still in her hands.

“C’mom,” Max tossed another pair of sunglasses at her, “I need a par’dner, par’dner- somebody’s gotta keep these boys in line.”

It was a real wretch, apparently, giving up her yellow weed-flowers, but the sunglasses seemed to help. Eleven sighed and picked herself off the ground, prissily straightening her many bracelets before unfolding the shades and sliding them carefully up her nose. She crossed her arms and struck a pose when they were in place.

Somehow she managed to look intimidating, even at four-and-a-half feet tall with sweaty curls stuck to her forehead and dandelion powder on her nose.

“You’re comin’ with me, numbnuts,” she growled and flicked her thumb over her shoulder.

“Bad- ass!” Max cried, thoroughly impressed.

El smiled.

“S what Hopper says,” she explained matter-of-factly.

“That’s right, you’ve got the inside scoop!” Max nodded. “You’ll fit in here just fine, Skipper,” she assured her. “C’mon, let’s go make the rounds.”

They stalked around the group, pausing briefly to give Mike a careful once-over. He lifted his arm to raise an eyebrow at them, lip quirking upwards at the sight of El in aviators.

“Carry on, sir,” Max nodded at him, “just know: we’re watchin’ you.”

“Ten-four,” he saluted and went back to lounging in the sun.

They sauntered up behind Will, who was flipping through Lucas’ notebook in search of a blank page.

“What are all these notes?” he asked, eyebrows sliding up his forehead. “‘C’ may now be removed from list of suspects. Agent tracked ‘C’ behind the elementary school where he was witnessed jumping into the dumpster and... eating full bags of trash?” Will looked up in disbelief. Lucas leaned in to peer down at the page. Will continued: “Agent then followed ‘C’ down Barry’s Lane where Target Number One was in plain view and vulnerable to attack. ‘C’ did not approach or appear at all interested in the Target, leading the Agent to believe ‘C’ is unaware of the existence of the Merchandise. As always, Agent was unseen and unheard, one smooth operator and handsome to boot. Over and out.”

Lucas mouthed the last bit to himself and nodded, eyes bright.

“Pretty cool, huh?” he said.

“Lucas, what is all this?” Will asked, bewildered. “Who is ‘C’ and why is he eating bags of trash? What is ‘Target Number One’? And what on Earth is ‘the Merchandise’?”

“Do you remember when we overheard old man Rice going on and on about how something was getting in his chicken coop this spring and killing all his hens?” Will looked at him blankly. “We were in the grocery store,” Lucas prompted, “we were stocking up on bottles of Cola for our experiment? You know, the one with the Mentos and Pop Rocks?”

“Alright...” Will said, not understanding what Pop Rocks had to do with ‘the Merchandise.’

“Yeah, so farmer Rice was getting really annoyed that no one could figure out what was going on- he called it a real mystery- so I decided to go on the case and solve it!”

“So...” Will chewed on this for a moment, “‘Target Number One’ is-”

“The chicken coop,” Lucas nodded.

“And ‘the Merchandise’ are-”

“Chickens,” Lucas confirmed.

“And so, ‘C’ is...”

“Cheeto,” Lucas said. Will squinted at him.

“The McCoys’ coonhound,” he explained.

Will rubbed his chin.

“So you successfully tracked and followed a coonhound (named Cheeto) around the elementary school and down Barry’s Lane without anyone finding out what you were doing?” he clarified.

“Oh yeah,” Lucas nodded.

“Wow,” Will said. “You must be really proud.”

“It’s all about following clues and solving mysteries, man,” Lucas shrugged modestly.

“So did you?” Will asked.

“Hmm?” Lucas casually slid on a pair of sunglasses. “Did I what?”

“Did you figure out who was breaking into farmer Rice’s chicken coops?” Will asked. “Did you solve the mystery?”

“Oh,” Lucas paused. “Nah. It got kind of boring, actually, following all those dogs around.”

Max had heard more- far more- than enough.

“Hands up!” she pounced into the space between the two boys. Lucas, startled, looked up and found himself nose to nose with the barrel of her toy gun. “You, sir, are under arrest for the absolute worst case of being a huge nerd I have ever seen- and I’ve seen some shit; Hopper here can attest to that,” she flicked her thumb at El.

“Yeah,” El stepped up behind Max and crossed her arms. “Sit down and shut up, shit-for-brains!”

“Nice, *El*,” Max whispered. “Well?” she tossed her hair over her shoulder and looked down her nose at Lucas. “I said, hands up!”

“Alright, alright,” he grumbled, glaring at her. He raised his palms and waved them sarcastically in the air.

Max relaxed, lowering her arms-

Lucas dove, snatching the gun out of her hand and executing a neat little roll on the grass to spring back to his feet. He turned on her victoriously.

“Ha HA!” he cried. “Now, I’m going to have to put YOU under arrest- for being a giant pain in the ass!” He snapped his head from side to side so his glasses slid to the tip of his nose. He lifted his eyebrows and pinned her with a look. “How do you plead, perp?”

Max spread her fingers in appeasement. “Guilty,” she admitted sadly.

“That’s right, you are,” Lucas nodded in satisfaction. “Now, put your hands behind your back-” he made to grab her wrists but something stopped him- he was held back, unable to reach out- it didn’t hurt, but try as he might, he couldn’t step even one foot closer-

“Eleven!” he shouted, turning on the other girl. “Stop holding me back! She confessed, now let me book her!”

El shook her head and dabbed her nose.

“That’s my par’dner,” she said. “She might be a pain in the ass, but she’s my friend.”

Lucas saw Max grin behind him in the reflection on El's aviators.

"Hm," he considered this. "That is admirable. Alright," he decided, "I'm gonna let you both go- this time only, so count your lucky stars, you hear me?" He flipped the gun around his fingers and holstered it, super slick.

"You count *your* lucky—" Max started behind him but trailed off when they all turned at the sound of Dustin whooping and hollering twenty feet away.

They stared.

"What do you think happened to him?" Will asked quietly.

"Isn't he always like that?" Max pointed out.

"Not- not like this," Lucas shook his head, wide-eyed.

Dustin darted toward first base, then changed his mind and headed for third, then back to first, then second, then- possibly- short-stop? Then he turned three quick circles, did a jumping air guitar, whooped again, and headed for home.

"Dustin!" Lucas called out, concerned. Even Mike sat up to gaze open-mouthed at Dustin's antics. "What is wrong with you, man?"

"I'm feelin' good," Dustin gasped and veered his course to run in a circle around them. "I'm feelin' goooooooooooooood YEAH!" He skipped, then jumped, then hopped, attempted a pitiful cartwheel, landed on his rump with a grunt, then bounced to his feet and skipped again.

"I think we've got a possible case of mind alteration here," Max muttered to her co-horts. El nodded seriously while Lucas rubbed his chin in contemplation. "Hard to tell, with one who is already so mental—"

"I've got the fever," Dustin wheezed, weaving his head back and forth. He kicked his knees up to his chin and snapped his fingers. "I've got the fe-he-HE-heever, yeah!"

“Dustin, you are acting weirder than normal,” Mike said, getting up to take him by the shoulders and shake him, “and that- is- *saying something!*”

Dustin swept him forcibly into a waltz step-

“Hey!” Mike protested, struggling-

“Up, up, down,” Dustin chanted, turning him in circles, “up, up, down-”

Eleven giggled.

“Oh, no,” Lucas said, voice hushed. They turned to watch as he knelt by his backpack and rummaged through the contents strewn in the grass.

“Dustin,” he breathed, looking up in horror, “did you eat *all* of those LifeSavers?”

“Sure did!” Dustin cried, setting Mike free with a little spin and starting a set of deep lunges across the field.

“You know you can’t handle your sugar!” Lucas huffed and stood up, crossing his arms. “You always get so weird, man!”

“I’m not weird,” Dustin protested, still lunging. “It’s weird that you’re *not* doing this,” he argued.

“It’s weird that we’re not running around screaming like we’ve lost our minds?” Mike asked, the ‘oh please’ unsaid but clear as day in his voice.

“It’s summer!” Dustin called over his shoulder, converting a deep lunge to a leapfrog. “The sun is shining, it’s hot but not too hot, we’re with all our friends, we don’t have to go to school, we’re young and we’re free!” He stood up and threw out his arms. “Why *aren’t* you guys running around screaming?!”

They looked at each other.

“He actually- you know, I think he actually has a point,” Will said, a

bit shellshocked.

“Alright,” Mike nodded at his feet, chewed his lip, then snapped his head up, eyes bright. “Alright!” he said again. “I have an idea—everybody! I have an idea about what we can do this afternoon.”

“Oh, god, *finally*,” Max groaned. “Hey, you’re the *de facto* leader of this band of misfits,” she protested when he shot her an annoyed look. “That means, you’re supposed to come up with all the ideas and tell us exactly what we’re supposed to do all the time.”

Mike’s brow furrowed.

“I’m not the—” he started.

“HeyMikeWhat’sYourIdea?” Dustin gasped, zooming past them.

Mike shook his head as he skidded to third base then veered back around.

“Let’s race,” he turned to the others. “First one to the outfield fence gets to choose what game we play.”

“Yes! Wheeler!” Dustin whooped, sliding to a stop in front of them. “I knew you’d come through!”

“Alright,” Max nodded, “I’m in.”

“You’re going down, Maxine,” Lucas said, backing up a few steps, taunting her.

“Whatever, Stalker,” Max rolled her eyes.

“And- *no cheating!*” Lucas announced, looking between them carefully, stopping an extra half-second on El. “Legs only, okay?”

“Yeah, sure,” Mike shrugged, “like that’ll help you.”

They lined up against the dugout.

“Wait!” Will called, and scurried forward to scoop up a few more pairs of sunglasses from Lucas’ stray debris. He tossed a pair at Mike

and another at Dustin, sliding his own shades on and turning to the rest with a huge smile.

“Lookin’ good, Byers,” Max called from down the row, while Dustin snapped a quick turn and gave a high-pitched Michael Jackson yelp.

“Alright,” Mike pressed his shoulder blades against the fence, and turned to either side where his friends lined up beside him. “One,” he counted, “two-”

“Hey!” Lucas stepped forward with a glare. “Why do you get to do the countdown?”

“Lucas,” Mike groaned, “are we going to do this or not?”

“I’m just saying,” Lucas said mulishly, “I think Will should do the countdown.”

Will pulled himself off the fence and stared between them.

“Why me?” he asked.

“Because-” Lucas said unwillingly, “well- you know-”

“Know what?” Will demanded.

Lucas looked to Mike in silent appeal.

“C’mon, Will,” Mike said, “it’s just, you- you’re probably not going to win, okay?”

“Hey!” Will protested, offended.

“I’m sorry!” Mike said quickly. “But you have the shortest legs-”

“Nu-uh!” Will shook his head. “El’s *way* shorter than me!”

El swiped off her glasses and glared at him.

“That’s different,” Mike said.

“Oh, and *why*?” Will asked witheringly.

“Because-” Mike trailed off, helpless.

“Because she’s a *girl*?” Max said, outraged on her par’dner’s behalf. They traded glances in solidarity.

“No!” Mike exclaimed. “Because- because-”

He turned and looked at El. She crossed her arms, tapped her toe in the dirt, and waited.

“Because she’s super scary!” Dustin piped up helpfully.

Will rolled his eyes. El simpered, straightening her dandelion bracelets.

“Fine!” he huffed. “Everybody up against the wall!”

They shuffled back until their shoulders were pressed up tight against the fence.

“You guys ready?” Will called.

They looked down the line at each other, trading sunglass-glares and muttered insults.

“On your marks!” Will yelled.

They crouched.

“Get set!” he shouted.

They breathed in, ready.

“GO!”

## 4. Chapter 4

### Notes for the Chapter:

Thank you all for reading! :-) Please comment if you enjoy!

Mike strutted across the outfield, chest puffed and legs kicking like a proud chicken.

Lucas groaned and fell to his knees, devastated.

“Robbed!” he held his head in his hands and moaned. “I was robbed, I tell you!”

El walked up behind him and brushed a sympathetic hand over the top of his head. “You did good, Lucas,” she said, “but Mike won fair-and-square.”

“But- but-” he protested, waving an agonized hand at Mike, “just look at him! It *can’t* be fair that we should have to watch *that!*”

Mike’s elbows were pushed behind his back while he twisted his legs oddly below.

“What’s he doing?” Eleven watched him, bemused.

“He’s doing the chicken dance,” Will said, coming up to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with her. They squinted and tilted their heads in unison while Mike wobbled his knees together and turned a circle.

“Mike doesn’t look like a chicken,” El commented, brow furrowed.

Will huffed a laugh. “Well, he does kind of have chicken legs,” he pointed out. “Y’know- long and skinny,” he clarified when she tilted him a confused eye.

“Hmm,” El considered this, turning back to see Mike kick one leg out to the side, the light of victory in his eyes.

“Good race, everyone,” Max said, squeezing herself between them

and throwing her arms over their shoulders. Her cheeks were pink, chest still pumping overtime. “I really thought you were gonna catch me, Byers,” she said, “we were *so close!*”

“Yeah,” Will crooked her a smile, pleased at not having come in last, or even second-to-last. “You’re fast, Max,” he said, impressed.

“Gonna have to get faster, to keep outrunning you,” she pushed her sunglasses on top her head and mopped her sweaty brow. “As soon as you get a little taller- it’ll all be over for me,” she told him.

“Yeah,” Will sighed, looking down at his feet. “If I ever do get any taller,” he mumbled.

“You will,” Max said confidently. “Boys keep growing until they’re, like, 25,” she declared. “Or 18, I don’t remember, I just know you’ve got a lot of time left- not like me and Eleven,” she turned a pitying eye on her other friend. “Poor El,” she shook her head, “she’ll be a shrimp forever.”

“I will?” El asked, eyes wide. She looked between them. “I won’t grow anymore?”

“Well, probably a little bit,” Max conceded. “But I don’t think you’re gonna make it as a Rockette, is all I’m saying.”

El’s lip quivered.

“Hey,” Will turned to her, concerned. “Being short’s not so bad- and you don’t have the frustration of not being able to reach things up high because you can just move them with your mind,” he pointed out.

El sniffled.

“Why are you so upset?” he asked gently. “I didn’t think you cared that much about being short- you didn’t even really try to win the race just now.” She hadn’t- she’d skipped behind the rest, pausing to pick a dandelion puff and blow its threads to the wind.

“Wanted Mike to win,” she mumbled.

“Well, that’s a surprise,” Max said drily.

“Mike won,” she continued miserably, “he’s the fastest and the tallest, and Max says he’s gonna keep growing until he’s 25, but me- I’m short and slow and Max says I’ll always be short and slow!” Her voice wobbled.

“Oh, crap,” Max groaned to herself, then turned to the outfield. “WHEELER!” she yelled. “C’MERE, YOUR SHORT GIRLFRIEND NEEDS YOU!”

El glared at her.

“Hey, guys, what’s up,” Mike said breathlessly, running up to them. He tossed his hair off his forehead and set his hands on his hips. “Did you see my moves, huh?” He jiggled his leg. “Pretty cool, right?”

“Whoever taught you the meaning of that word had it so backwards,” Max declared.

“Whatever, Maxine,” Mike rolled his eyes. “You wouldn’t know cool if it walked right up to you and did this-” he bobbed his head and sauntered backwards, legs kicking.

“That- is- accurate,” Max nodded, eyebrows high.

El giggled.

“I like it,” she said. Mike’s smile spread across his face.

“Yeah?” he huffed, striking a pose.

“Yeah,” she told him. “You’ve got really good chicken legs.”

Will snorted. Mike paused and considered this.

“Y’know what,” he decided, “I do have really good chicken legs- and as they say, ‘if you’ve got it, flaunt it,’ right?” He strutted toward the fence.

“That’s right, Wheeler,” Max said approvingly (of the sentiment, not the dancing). “So come tell your shrimpy girlfriend it’s okay if she’s

always gonna be short.”

Mike veered around and stopped in front of them, wiping the back of his hand across his forehead. “Huh?” he said, looking from El to Max and back. “Of course El is always gonna be short,” he said.

El scowled at him, chin trembling.

“I mean-” he furrowed his brow, not completely sure what was going on. “You totally grew, like, a whole inch from last year,” he patted her on the head.

El sucked in an aggrieved breath, tears shimmering in her eyes.

“Ah, shit,” Mike muttered. “What’d I say?” he looked to the others for help.

“We’re gonna have to break up!” Eleven burst out, distraught.

“What?!” Mike’s head whipped around. “*Why?*”

“You’re gonna be too tall for me,” Eleven said sadly. “And not just for a few years- *forever*,” she wiped at her eyes. “I’m sorry, Mike,” she whispered, “I’m sorry for bein’ so shrimpy.”

“Uhm,” Mike coughed, “you know you’re my favorite person, El,” he said, “but you’re not making any sense.”

“Tall people have to be with other tall people,” she explained matter-of-factly. “They can’t be with short ones.”

“Says who?” Mike demanded.

El looked at him seriously. “Hopper,” she said.

“*What?*” Mike spluttered, outraged. “How dare he- why would he- that’s so-”

“Strange,” Max nodded in agreement, “and out of character. What were you talking about, El, before he said that?”

El gnawed at her thumbnail, glancing sideways at Will. “About...

Mrs. Byers,” she confessed.

“Uh- why?” Will drew out the word, suspicious.

El sighed. “I told Hopper he should marry Mrs. Byers,” she explained.

“You *what*!?” Will squeaked. “Hopper- the Chief- and *my mom*?” He shook his head, stunned. “Why would you even- what would give you *that* idea?”

El shrugged. “Dunno,” she said, glancing to Mike, “I just thought- a couple of times, I thought I felt- it seemed like there was-”

“-chemistry,” Mike nodded, staring at her.

Will narrowed his eyes, looking from one to the other. “Well, obviously, you were wrong,” he declared, then straightened. “Wait-” he said, “did Hopper say- he wouldn’t want to be with *my mom*- because- because-”

“Because she’s too short,” El nodded sadly. “He said people as short as Joyce can’t be with people as tall as him,” her lip quivered again, “he said they look too ‘posturous together and it would never work,’ two tears rolled down her cheekbones, “and Mike’s gonna be as tall as Hopper,” she gestured at him wildly, “and I’m- I’m- I’m-” she shuddered in misery, “I’m always gonna be short like Will’s mom!”

Mike bit the insides of his cheeks to keep from laughing. He slid his arm around her shoulders and squeezed. “C’mon, El,” he said, “do you wanna break up with me ‘cause I’m too tall?” He gave her his best sad-Mike-eyes.

She wiped at her nose and blinked up at him. “I don’t *wanna*,” she said, “but- we *have* to-”

“I don’t think Hopper was exactly being honest with you,” Max piped up.

El looked at her, confused. “Hopper doesn’t lie to me,” she protested.

“Well- not *lying*, exactly,” Max hedged, “I mean- Will’s mom is really short-”

“Hey!” Will cried, annoyed.

“But it was kind of a personal thing for you to ask him about,” Max pointed out, “and adults don’t usually like to talk about that stuff with kids.”

“Oh,” El chewed her lip. “So- so it’s not really because he’s too tall that he and Joyce can’t be together?” she asked.

Mike shook his head. “I doubt it.”

“So we don’t have to break up!” she exclaimed, eyes bright.

He grinned down at her. “I hope not,” he said.

She threw her arms around his neck and stood on tiptoe. He bent to press his lips against hers for just the briefest second.

“Ugh, my back,” he joked, straightening up again.

El giggled. Max rolled her eyes but couldn’t keep her lip from quirking upward. Will scowled at the ground.

“I still can’t believe *Hopper* would turn down *my mom*,” he grumbled.

“He didn’t,” Max reminded him. “He probably just said that to make Eleven stop talking about it-”

“Uh, you guys?” they turned at Lucas’ call to find him standing in the center of the outfield, staring down at the grass.

“What is it, Lucas?” Mike called back.

He looked up. “You better come over here.”

They shared concerned glances before setting off across the field.

“Oh no,” Will breathed when they jogged up to Lucas’ side.

Mike shook his head. “I knew this would happen,” he said.

“Of course it was going to happen!” Lucas exclaimed, flinging out his hand. “But I didn’t think it would be so soon-”

Dustin groaned from his prostrate position on the ground. His eyes flicked back and forth underneath his closed lids. His brow furled in distress.

“Can’t- move,” he moaned, arms crossed around his waist. “Stomach- hurts-”

“Yeah, yeah,” Lucas rolled his eyes. “You still came in last, a little tummyache from too much candy isn’t going to change that!”

Dustin glared up at him with one eye.

“It was a legitimate hardship!” he protested. “We should go again-”

“No way!” Mike exclaimed. “Everyone agreed to the rules, I won,” he thumbed his chest, “now I get to choose what we play next!”

Dustin looked to the others in appeal. “Well- it should at least be called a forfeit- not last place-”

“Nope,” El shook her head and pointed at him. “You came in *last*- after me!”

“El,” he pleaded, “it’s too humiliating- please tell Mike we have to go again- that way he’ll know he *actually* won fair and square-”

“Mike is first,” El said, “and Dustin is last.”

Dustin squeezed his eyes shut and whimpered.

“Oh, the humanity!” he moaned.

“Alright,” Mike leaned down and grabbed his hand, “are you done with your pity party yet?”

Dustin let himself be pulled to his feet very begrudgingly.

“My pity party has at least another 30 minutes of steam left!” he argued.

Mike shook his head. “Nope,” he decided, “you’re done. I won, and I’m ready to tell you all the game I’ve decided we’re going to play

today.”

They gathered together, huddling closer in anticipation.

“I’ve decided...” he looked between them, “the game we’re going to play is...” he paused dramatically, “...the new D&D campaign I came up with for all of you!”

They looked at him in disbelief.

“Mike,” Lucas shook his head, “we’re already out here- I don’t want to go back inside now-”

“We don’t have to go back!” Mike said quickly. “We can play right here- well, in the woods nearby, too- and it won’t exactly be like D&D, we’ll have to change up the rules a little bit- but I think we should play the new campaign, only instead of rolling dice, we’ll have to make it through some physical tests- and maybe we could split into teams and fight over a common goal- and some of us can play more than one character, so we can be an evil orc *and* the good guy-”

They looked at him in consideration.

“Can I be a dragon?” Max asked. “I wanna be a dragon.”

Mike screwed up his face, irritated. “No!” he huffed. “You can’t be a dragon- that wouldn’t make any sense.”

El turned and gave him a very pointed look.

“I mean,” he faltered, eyes flicking to El and back, “Max, it just wouldn’t work with the storyline- and how would it be fair to any of the other players-”

El’s eyes widened dangerously.

“Oh, fine,” he threw up his hands, “I suppose we can have a short scene- a *short* scene- where the other characters come up against a dragon and have to... get past it to save the princess or something-”

“Ooooh,” Max said, eyes brightening, “can I be the dragon *and* the

princess?”

“What?” Mike yelped. “How would that even-”

Max’s eyes slid deliberately to El before coming back to pin Mike with an annoyingly smug look.

“Fine,” he said dully, “whatever- you can be the princess and the dragon-”

“Aw yeah!” Max pumped her fist, “I’m *in!*”

“Hey, there, Mike,” Lucas murmured, leaning closer, “While we’re at it- I’ve got a few requests for *my* character’s storyline...”

Mike sighed and pressed his fingertips to his temples.

At this rate, they wouldn’t even *start* the game before nightfall.

## 5. Chapter 5

### Notes for the Chapter:

LOL this is gettin pretty silly. Thank you for reading!  
:-)

“Mogg the Mighty doth ask his good friend Will the Wise to set down his arms,” Dustin said, swooping into a low bow, “and join his quest to take back the fire sword from the evil traitor, Leonid the Lousy.”

“Hey!” Lucas stepped up, a small tree branch strapped to his waist, “that’s Lord Leonid the Lefthand to you! Don’t listen to him, good wizard, sire,” he knelt at Will’s feet, “I won this sword as recompense for my heroics in saving a poor innkeeper’s family from the hideous ogre, Trogmadon-”

“Yeah right!” Dustin threw out his hands incredulously. “We *both* saved the innkeeper’s family, only *I* was gravely injured and *you* took the sword right off my unconscious body-”

“So I could stab Trogmadon in the chest just in time to save the little girl from being eaten!” Lucas exclaimed. “If it weren’t for me, that whole family would be toast- and you would be, too!”

“No way,” Dustin shook his head stubbornly. “And anyway, you didn’t have to keep the sword- it took me six campaigns to find that thing!”

“It’s not my fault you rolled a three,” Lucas shrugged. “You literally had to get a four or above- and you rolled a three!” He turned to Will in appeal. “Surely that’s a sign from the great Gallamahadriel who rules over us all that the sword was meant to be mine-”

“Are you following any of this?” Max asked El in aside while Will tapped his chin in consideration.

Eleven shrugged but didn’t seem too concerned. “They like to fight,” she said, “helps them get out all their ‘gression from havin’ a million hormones swimming around in their body.”

Max snorted. “Hop tell you that?”

El nodded, watching the boys, then turned seriously to Max. “What’s a hormone?” she asked. “And how’d they fit so many inside?”

“Hmm,” Max pondered this. “A hormone’s like... it’s like a little bug that lives in your blood,” she explained. “And when you get to be a teenager, they start moving around really fast, and splitting in two to make more and more, and that’s what makes you grow so fast.”

El glanced at her friend out of the corner of her eye. She’d only just started her sixth-grade science workbook, but something told her that didn’t sound exactly right.

“*En garde!*” they heard Dustin shout, darting forward to brandish a pointy stick in Lucas’ face.

“You guys-” Will tried-

“Oh, you really wanna go there?” Lucas demanded, leaning back from the dangerously close flicks of Dustin’s twig.

“I’m not afraid of you!” Mogg the Mighty shouted, hopping around his foe in a challenging circle. “Arise and fight me, ye coward!”

“Just remember,” Leonid Lefthand warned, unsheathing his mighty tree branch and raising it threateningly, “you asked for it! Sword, ignite!” He pointed it at Dustin and took a deliberate step forward-

“You- you don’t scare me!” Mogg declared, shuffling back a few steps. Leonid pounced. Mogg shrieked, dropping to the ground.

Will rolled his eyes. “Really, Dustin?”

“Hey, he’s got a burning sword!” Dustin protested, cowering. Lucas smirked. “He’s got- *my* burning sword!” He dove at Lucas’ feet, wrapping his arms around his calves. Lucas shouted in outrage, losing his balance and tumbling to the ground.

“Dustin!” they heard him yell before Dustin leapt over him and grabbed the tree branch-

“Give it back!” Dustin huffed, tugging with all his might-

Lucas wrapped his arms and legs around it like a snake. “No!” he bellowed. “It’s mine, I won it!”

“Ugh- you are so dead, Lucas,” Dustin panted, dropping to his knees to scrabble for the sword-

“It’s *Lord Leonid Lefthand*,” Lucas protested, “and you’ll never take it off me, not while I live and breathe!” They scrabbled in the grass, knees and elbows flying-

Eleven huffed a sigh and rolled her eyes impressively. She turned to Max. “Boys,” she started to say before she saw-

“Yeah, Lucas- I mean Leonid!” her friend had darted forward to stand behind the wrestling duo, watching avidly. “Go for the right hook-no, not the *jab*, you’re not in the right position for that, c’mon, man, *think!*”

“Hey,” Dustin panted, glancing briefly up at her over his shoulder, “no spectators allowed!” Then he lunged abruptly to the left, attempting to take his enemy by surprise.

“Whatever,” Max shook her head, “the Isle of Cagalithia is a free country-”

They both stopped to glare at her in disbelief. “No, it’s not!” they protested in unison.

Will took advantage of their momentary distraction to jump forward. “C’mon guys,” he said entreatingly, “why don’t you stop fighting and we’ll come up with a way to take turns so you can *both* have the sword-”

“Like joint custody?” Max set her hands on her hips. “No way,” she shook her head. “That never works- now *fight!*” she crouched and hit her fist against her palm in excitement.

Dustin and Lucas looked at each other a moment, then went back to scrabbling over the tree branch.

“Yeah, Dustin-” Max huffed, “go for the chokehold- Lucas, his left side is wide open- c’mon, Dustin, counterpunch- the hair, Lucas, pull his hair!”

“Isn’t the sword supposed to be on fire?” Eleven asked Will, brow furrowed.

“I don’t think they should be doing this,” Will shook his head, agitated. El looked at him more closely. His shoulders were tight, his knee bouncing with anxiety. “I mean- why do they always have to fight?” he pushed his hair off his forehead irritably. “I know they’re not, like, *really* trying to hurt each other,” he flicked his hand at the pair, then crossed his arms, “but something could happen-”

“You’re a wizard,” El pointed out, “you could make them stop.”

Will chewed his lip. “That’s not-” he started. “I mean, I’m sure they’re almost done-”

“Will,” she said. “You have way more fighter points than either of them. If you think they should stop, make them listen to you.”

Will turned to watch as Dustin pinned Lucas to the ground with the tree branch against his chest. Lucas swiped desperately at Dustin’s face. They all winced when his fingernails scrabbled at Dustin’s cheekbone. “Hey!” Dustin yelped indignantly, leaning back-

Will set his jaw. “That’s enough!” he called angrily, stepping forward. “I cast a spell to separate the two of you from touching until you can settle your differences-”

“Sorry, Will,” Dustin huffed, working at peeling Lucas’ fingers off the branch one by one, “but this is personal now-”

El watched Will wilt, his shoulders slumping. She stepped up behind him.

“Again,” she whispered in his ear.

Will took a deep breath.

“Lord Leonid the Lefthand!” he called, voice wavering. “Mogg the

Mighty!” his voice grew stronger. He lifted one hand and spread his fingers impressively. “I compel you to- *stop- fighting- and- separate!*”

He watched, wide-eyed, as the boys were pulled away, still kicking, by some invisible string to dangle a foot above the ground, unable to get down or to touch each other.

“Whoa,” Max murmured, open-mouthed.

“What the-” Lucas twisted helplessly, harnessed somewhere just above his shoulder blades-

“Hey,” Dustin shouted, “look!” he jogged his legs like he was running on an invisible floating treadmill.

“Hai-ya!” Lucas fanned a magnificent side kick in mid-air.

“Alright, El,” Dustin twisted to the side to set her an apologetic look. “We get it, we’ll stop now.”

“Wasn’t me,” she shook her head, swiping at her nose. “Was Will the Wise.”

They looked from Will to El and back.

Will crossed his arms and stood up tall.

“I’ll let you down,” he decided, “but, no more actual fighting!” Dustin, Lucas and Max groaned in disappointment.

“C’mon, Will,” Max appealed to him, “how else are they gonna get out all their hormonal aggression?”

“What?!” Dustin squeaked, horrified, while Lucas twisted wildly in the air. “I’ll show you hormonal-” he growled.

“And,” Will continued pointedly, “the sword will go to-” he flicked his eyes quickly around the group before deciding, “Max.”

The boys’ howls could be heard clear across the cornfields all the way to the stables at Prairie Hill Farms. The horses pricked their ears, tails twitching nervously.

“That’s the way it goes, suckas!” Max preened between them, picking up the discarded tree branch with a flourish.

“That was mine!” Lucas wailed, kicking uselessly. “Why should she have it? She didn’t even win it-”

“Now you know how I feel,” Dustin pointed out, a flicker of satisfaction in his voice.

“Uh-” they all turned to find Mike crossing the outfield, approaching them from the woods. He jogged the last few steps and came to stand next to El, taking in the scene in front of him with some confusion. “What’s going on, you guys?”

“They were fighting over their dumb sword,” Max piped up before anyone could even open their mouths. “And then Will cast a spell to make them stop, and he said *I* could have the sword, and now- now we’re here,” she shrugged.

Mike looked from Max, to the pair suspended helplessly in mid-air, to Will, to El. “Eleven,” he leant in closer, “are you sure you should- I mean, aren’t you going to drain yourself, get all tired?” he asked.

She blinked at him innocently. “Not me,” she said, “Will the Wise.”

“El,” Mike tilted her a look, “seriously.”

“Kiss her, Mike!” Dustin yelled, twisting desperately. “She’ll get all distracted- she won’t be able to keep us up here-”

“Nah,” El narrowed her eyes at the boys over Mike’s shoulder, “it’s not that hard to hold them up. They’re all puny.”

“Hey!” Dustin readied his fists at her while Lucas flexed a bicep.

Mike smirked, turning to the others. “That’s what you get for starting without me,” he announced. “You can’t play without a Dungeon Master,” he shook his head. “Amateurs.”

Lucas rolled his eyes. “We already have our characters,” he pointed out. “What else do we need?”

“Uh,” Mike twisted his face in disbelief, “rules?!”

“Rules,” Max repeated in disgust. “Rules are meant to be broken, baby.”

“You can’t break them if you don’t have them in the first place,” Will pointed out.

“Where have you been, anyway?” Dustin demanded. “You know you can’t leave us unsupervised for so long!”

“I’ve been scouting out the locations for our game,” Mike said as though it should have been obvious. “And I think we’re ready to start- we just have to go over some basic world-setting information and ground rules-”

“Ground rules!” Lucas groaned as though it was the most painful thing he’d ever had the misfortune to hear. “I thought this wasn’t gonna be just like D&D-”

“Even outdoors RPGs in the sun have rules!” Mike exploded.

“Even outdoors RPGs in the sun have rules,” Dustin and Lucas mimicked him at the same time, then turned to each other, wide-eyed.

“Jinx!”

“Double-jinx!”

“Triple-jinx, YouOweMeACoke, HA!”

“Yeah, well, you owe me your mom’s phone number-”

“Dustin!” Lucas screamed, “I told you to *stop joking about that!*”

“No, really,” Dustin said, waving his hands quickly. “I just have to ask her a question.”

Lucas narrowed his eyes suspiciously. “What question?”

“I need to ask her if she has a library card,” Dustin said.

Lucas blinked.

Max shook her head. “Don’t do it-” she breathed.

“Why?” Lucas asked.

Dustin shrugged. “Just wanna know how she’s gonna pay for all those times she’s been checking me out.”

“Oh my god,” Mike closed his eyes and groaned at the wretched monstrosity of Dustin’s joke.

“You are so dead,” Lucas growled. “El!” he yelled. “El, let me down! Let me down so I can kill my best friend-”

“Nope,” El shook her head. “I’ll let you down, *but-*” she eyed them dangerously, “it’s to listen to Mike’s rules so we can all play Mike’s game.” They huffed and glared at each other. “And *no fighting!* Understand?” she asked.

“Yeah, yeah,” they grumbled.

“Better hold on to your lunch money,” Lucas threatened Dustin under his breath.

El leaned in to whisper in Will’s ear. “Go on,” she said.

Will glanced at El, surprised, then turned to the boys. He lifted both his hands and swirled them around quite majestically. “Because you have agreed to stop fighting,” he announced in a very wise voice, “and the sword has come into the possession of Malinda Maybeard, the beautiful Barbarian Gnome,” Max curtseyed, simpering, “you may now be free!” He clapped his hands and the boys dropped to the ground, stretching and groaning at their fighting bruises.

El stepped forward and plopped herself between them, sitting cross-legged in the grass. She waved Max and Will over, then looked up at Mike, blinking against the sun.

“We’re ready now, Mike,” she announced. “Tell us all about the rules to the game.”

## 6. Chapter 6

### Notes for the Chapter:

I'm slowing down a bit, but definitely still feeling good about this fic! Thank you all for reading, and please leave me a note if you enjoy!

“This is nuts, Mike!” Lucas gasped, arms trembling.

“Give up, Stalker?” Max called, voice strained, from the other side of the line.

“Never!” Lucas wheezed, twisting his head around awkwardly to glare at her.

Dustin side-eyed them both, then walked his feet against the wall to twine his ankle around Lucas’ calf.

“Dustin-” Lucas was able to get out before Dustin yanked, hard, pulling the other boy off balance.

“Hey!” he spluttered and kicked, outraged. Dustin howled a garbled response before they both toppled into the grass, knocking Eleven over in the process.

El dragged herself up off the ground and pinned them with a scalding look.

“Mouthbreathers,” she muttered, turning her back on them.

Mike glanced at her sympathetically. “Sorry, El,” he said, “I thought you had really good form until they knocked you over.”

“Thanks, Mike,” she gave a long-suffering sigh. “S’ my own fault for hand-standing right next to them.”

“And then there were two,” Max tried to gloat, her voice thick, her face red. She swiveled her head around to peer over at Will. Will side-eyed her, then walked his hands carefully a few steps away.

“Smart, Will,” Dustin said approvingly. “Just wait her out- she can’t stay up too much longer-”

“Watch me!” Max cried indignantly.

“No, seriously, Will,” Dustin continued, “her face is *so* red right now, I wish you could see it, it’s like a tomato- I’m surprised her head hasn’t exploded yet-”

“I’m surprised *your* head hasn’t exploded,” Eleven turned on him unexpectedly, “from having such a tiny brain in it!”

“Whoa, *El*,” Dustin raised his brow, “first of all: ow; secondly: my head would have *im* ploded if it was due to my tiny brain; and third: real solid effort at a burn, there, I’m impressed!”

Eleven clenched her fists and glared. “You- you-” she pointed at him, “you talk too much!”

Mike snorted. Dustin had the good graces to look a little hurt.

“*Moi?!*” he placed his hand on his chest. “I talk a great deal, I will grant you that point, but it’s rather subjective to one person’s opinion on whether or not I talk *too* much-”

“Dustin, you talk too much,” Max called from her position against the fence, still upside-down.

“Well, of course *she*’s going to say-” Dustin started.

“Man, you couldn’t shut up for thirty minutes if your life depended on it,” Lucas declared.

“What kind of situation could possibly come up in which I would die if I couldn’t be quiet for-”

“Jeez, Dustin, you have an answer for everything,” Mike shook his head.

“Right, you’re supposed to say absolutely everything that comes into your head, everyone knows that-”

“You’re a good friend, Dustin,” Will piped up, his face pink, bangs hanging off his forehead. Dustin smiled, gratified, and opened his mouth-

“Which is why I have to be honest and say I think you have a real problem,” Will continued.

“What?!” Dustin looked around in consternation. “I can’t believe you’ve all turned against me. Just because *El*,” he threw his hand towards her, “says hardly *anything*-”

“Y’know, that’s not a bad idea,” Mike mused, tapping his chin. Eleven glanced at him in surprise.

“Idea? What idea?” Dustin swiveled his head between them. “I didn’t have an idea-”

“No, I did,” Mike said decisively and straightened, clearing his throat. “A dark cloud gathers above your heads. The winds pick up, swirling your cloaks about your legs. Lighting *flashes*!” He spread his fingers and widened his eyes. “Thunder rolls around the countryside!” El gasped. “Suddenly, a voice is heard from the distance:

“‘Mogg the Mighty,’ the voice announces. ‘Step forward, traveler.’”

Dustin narrowed his eyes but stepped up across from Mike while the others watched.

“I have heard the pleas of your friends and fellow adventurers,’ the voice says. ‘And it was not so easy to hear them, Mogg, because you were always talking.’”

Dustin (predictably) opened his mouth to argue, but the mighty voice from on high continued quickly.

“Therefore, so you may all commence your journey as peaceably and successfully as possible, I have decided to set a challenge upon you, Mogg: for the next hour, you may speak only as many words as your comrade, Evenstar the Fair, speaks.”

“Wh-” Dustin spluttered in indignation. Lucas whooped in delight, and Max laughed so hard her arms shook.

“Bu-” Dustin looked around wildly, eyes falling on El. “Sh-”

“For every word you speak over your allowance, you will lose one experience point, to be distributed amongst the other members of the party,” Mike raised a challenging eyebrow.

El turned to Dustin, a terribly smug look on her face. “Ha, ha,” she said.

Dustin gasped and pointed a finger at her. “That’s two!” he cried.

“And now you are back down to zero,” Mike rolled his eyes and resumed his impressive voice. “You may either accept this test, Mogg the Mighty, or you may choose to forfeit your spot in the journey.”

Dustin’s mouth dropped open, his eyes huge.

“Do you accept this challenge? Starting at,” Mike checked his watch, “2:27 in the afternoon on this, the fourteenth day of July?”

Dustin opened his mouth to respond, then thought better of it and nodded pitifully. Before Mike could continue, he dropped to his knees and shuffled forward at El’s feet. He clasped his hands together and gazed at her entreatingly.

Eleven pressed her lips together and tilted her head in mock confusion.

*El!* he mouthed, shaking his clasped hands at her, desperation in his eye. *Please!*

El rolled her eyes, crossed her arms, and sighed. “Fine,” she huffed.

Dustin lit up at first, but when it became clear that El was not going to continue, his excitement soured to frustration.

*One?!* he mouthed at her, holding up one finger. He looked around at the others. Eleven shrugged and wound a springy little curl around her knuckle.

He got up and shook his finger in her face in outrage. El glared at him in warning.

Dustin wilted, taking a step back. He sadly folded his one finger down against his palm and tucked it in his pocket.

“Gaah!” Max screamed suddenly, arms finally giving out. She landed on her shoulders, oozing down the wall into a defeated little puddle.

“And Max collapses, which makes the winner of our first challenge... Will the Wise!” Mike clapped enthusiastically. Will kicked his feet down and stood right-side-up, wobbling on his feet a few moments while the blood rushed back out of his head.

“Blearg,” Max mumbled from her slumped position on the ground.

Eleven crouched over her friend and held out a sympathetic hand.

“Thanks,” Max muttered, pulling herself up on her feet.

El slung her arm around her shoulders and tried to think of something encouraging to say. She nudged her around from the fence-

-when they pulled up short, coming nose-to-nose with Dustin, waiting avidly at their heels. He looked from El to Max and back, breath baited.

“Whoa, Dustin,” Max complained, “ever heard of personal space?”

Dustin just continued to stare at them, waiting.

“Ooh,” Max nodded, “I get it. You’re trying to wait out El. Good luck with that, *compadre*. She is a locked box when she wants to be.”

Dustin looked at Eleven pitifully, but there was only one person whose puppy dog eyes worked on El, and it wasn’t Dustin. She remembered how he had knocked over her perfect handstand and set her shoulders, lifting her chin haughtily.

“You’ve got one word available,” Max set helpfully. “Why don’t you use it?”

Dustin glared at her.

“You know you want to,” she sing-songed. “Go on, Dustin, say that one word you’ve been dying to say, let it out: express yourself.”

Dustin pushed his hair off his forehead and set his hands on his hips.

Max eyed him innocently. “What’s the worst that could happen?”

Dustin considered this for a moment. He tapped his chin in contemplation, then pinned Max with an imperious look.

“Nerd,” he said, pivoted on his heel and walked away.

Max stared at his retreating back, brow furrowed.

“Yeah,” she called after him, “like *that* really hurt my feelings!” She huffed a forced laugh and looked at El. “It didn’t.”

El tilted her a glance.

“Hey, ‘sticks and stones’ and all that, you know?”

El shook her head. She did not know what sticks and stones had to do with being called a nerd.

Max flicked her hair over her shoulder. “Whatever,” she said. “I am *not*,” she over-emphasized the word, “going to have my day ruined just because some mute dork called me a nerd.”

Mike was attempting to gather everyone by the fence so they could continue on to the next phase of their game.

“Because Will the Wise won the first challenge, he gets to choose what the party’s next step is.” Mike turned to Will. “What do you want to do?”

Will ruminated on this for a moment. Eleven relaxed, watching him think. It occurred to her that she’d never seen him mull over a situation in silence, not while the rest of the group was around. Her eyes slid to Dustin, who was staring moodily at the ground, knee bouncing anxiously. She smiled in satisfaction.

“I think...” Will announced, “I think we should find out more about

our mission and what we have been sent to accomplish.”

Eleven nodded, impressed. That was a very wise thing to do.

“Very well,” Mike said. “Ahead of you, a traveler appears on the road. It is an elf, come to open the gate.

“Greetings, adventurers,” Mike said in a very smooth voice, slightly lower pitched than normal. He bowed gracefully. “We have heard much about you and welcome you proudly to the Isle of Cagalithia. The elven council has called you here to locate and take back something precious that was stolen from them.”

“What is it?” Max asked, intrigued.

“I’m afraid I can’t tell you that, good Maybeard,” he tilted his head respectfully at her.

“Figures,” she muttered.

“The council has sent me to journey with you through the perilous countryside that envelops our fair towns and cities. We will spend our days trekking across mountains, forests and jungles, and our nights sleeping under the galaxies. Along our way, we will track clues and meet characters who will help us find what we seek. Beware: clues may be tricks in disguise and characters may not be as they appear.”

He looked around at them all, eyes bright.

“Well,” he said, “shall we begin?”

## 7. Chapter 7

### Notes for the Chapter:

Many thanks to [onslenderaccident](#) for the beta and for making me think about annoying things like, you know, *why* I am writing this story in the first place. ;-)

Thank you for reading, and please leave a note if you can!

“Hurry!” Mike urged, wide-eyed. “They’re almost on us—you need to make a decision, *quick!*”

“Okay,” breathed Max, head swiveling. “Okay,” she looked to El, then to Lucas, “Okay—”

“Wow, you are not good in a crisis,” Lucas said. “Duly noted.”

“What kind of monsters are coming for us, Mike?” Will asked solemnly.

“Fearsome beasts!” Mike spread his fingers dramatically. “Terrible creatures, come to prey on the weak—”

“Yeah, yeah,” Lucas flicked his hand impatiently. “But what *kind?*”

“Uh...” Mike squinted off into the distance, thinking fast. He turned back, eyes gleaming. “Tigers!” he said. “Giant tigers wi-with-with lizard tongues and great pointy horns on their tails!”

They stopped and considered this image for a moment.

“Are their tails like regular tiger tails, but with little spikes on them?” Lucas asked. “Or are they—”

“They’re alligator tails,” Mike said, a little annoyed. “No—stegosaurus tails!”

“Whoa,” Will nodded, “that *is* scary—”

“Yes, very scary, and there’s a whole pack: at least twenty of them are headed our way,” Mike bounced on his toes, shoulders tense, “within seconds they’ll pick up our scent, so *what do you want to do?*”

They looked at each other, uncertain.

“Five,” Mike counted, “four—”

Dustin huffed furiously and flipped up his palm. He quickly walked his fingers across it and glared at the rest of them.

“Dustin’s right,” Lucas said, “*Vámonos!*”

They thundered across the outfield, a hot summer wind on their cheeks. Lucas panted, arms pumping, and swerved through the gap in the fence, heading for the woods.

He looked back, eyes scanning the horizon. “Hurry!” he called to his compatriots, “They’re at the dugout— we have to make it to the woods, or we’re all dead!”

He turned forward again and sprinted for the treeline.

Behind him, Dustin wheezed and tried to pick up his pace. Mike clung to El’s hand and dragged her alongside him. Max nudged at Will’s heels, then jumped aside when he tripped.

“C’mon, Byers,” she screamed over her shoulder, “don’t just lay there like a slab of meat— you’re gonna get eaten—”

Will rolled on his side and pulled his legs underneath him.

“I can’t believe this,” he muttered, “my shoelaces came undone *again*, stupid piece of crap shoes—”

“Byers!” Max veered around and threw up her hands, aggrieved. “Let’s go!” she hustled back across the ground she’d just covered.

Will kicked his heel in the dirt and glowered. “Leave me,” he said, “let me be eaten, it’s what I deserve— tripped by my own stupid shoes—”

“No man left behind,” Max panted, yanking at his arm.

“I’m the slowest,” Will sulked, “I’d be the first to get picked off—”

“Get up,” she grunted, pulling at his sleeve.

“Save yourself,” he closed his eyes, melancholy settling onto his features. “Leave me to my gruesome end.”

“Ugh,” Max rolled her eyes. She stooped and, before Will knew what she was doing, pulled off his shoes and darted away.

“Hey!” Will cried at her retreating back. “What did you do that for?”

“Didn’t think you’d need them anymore!” her voice grew tinny as the distance widened between them. “Seeing as you’re gonna be chop suey!”

Will groaned at the depths of his misfortune, but dragged himself up and after her.

--

“Oh, good, you made it,” Mike clapped him on the shoulder when he caught up to the group. Will glared pointedly at Max, who smirked and tossed him his sneakers.

“The tiger-lizards are prowling around the baseball field now,” Mike continued, voice low. “They didn’t see us, but they’ve picked up our scent, and it’s only a matter of minutes before they find us. What should we do?”

Lucas glanced up at the crisscrossing branches above their heads and rubbed his palms on his jeans. “A-Team, with me,” he said, took a running start, leapt, and caught a low-hanging branch, dangled for a few seconds, then hoisted his legs up and over.

Dustin clapped his hands together and scrambled up the trunk of a

nearby tree. He tightened his fingers around a conveniently-placed nub and squinted for his next handhold.

Something gripped his leg. He jolted and looked down in surprise.

Max stood at the base of the tree, fingers squeezing a tight ring around his ankle. She met his eyes and curled her lip, smug.

She yanked hard. Dustin squawked indignantly as he scraped his way back down the tree. He stumbled a few steps when his feet hit the ground and glared at her.

“What’s that, Harpo?” Max cupped a hand around her ear. “I didn’t catch that. Did you say something?”

Dustin struggled to bite down on his tongue with the appropriate amount of force to keep choice words from spilling out. He looked around wildly for El, only to catch sight of Mike giving her a boost so she could wiggle up a wide branch on a nearby tree.

He huffed in frustration and turned back to Max.

“What’s the matter?” she taunted. “Rat got your tongue?”

He looked at her in disbelief.

“What?” she said.

*Rat?!* he mouthed.

“What?” she said again.

*No, cat*, he tried to correct her.

She furrowed her brow and leaned in close. “Huh?”

*Cat got your tongue*, he mouthed vigorously.

Max shook her head. “I don’t know what you’re saying, Dumbo,” she said. “Man, that rat got you good.”

Dustin threw up his hands in frustration, then gestured her pointedly up the tree ahead of him.

“Yeah,” Max looked from the tree to Dustin and back again. “I think I’m gonna... just go climb this one over here.”

Dustin grumbled under his breath, then started up again.

“So, since I got up here first,” Lucas said when they were all safely off the ground, “does that mean I get to choose what we do next?”

“This wasn’t a challenge,” Mike noted, leaning against his tree trunk. “This was part of the story.”

“Hey, I made it to the woods first *and* up the tree first,” Lucas protested. “I think that should count as a win.”

“You decided that we should wait out the tiger-lizards up here,” Mike reasoned. “You’ve already made a bunch of decisions.”

“Yeah, and can’t tigers climb trees?” Will asked, poking his head through some leaves.

They looked at him.

“Yep, I’m pretty sure tigers climb trees,” he said matter-of-factly. “And, of course, lizards do too, so they’re probably going to climb up here and drag us all back down.”

“Oh, great, thanks Lucas,” Max rolled her eyes. “We’re gonna fall to our deaths and get eaten by weirdo mutant crossbreeds.” She shook her head. “That is so not the way I wanted to go.”

“But these ones *don’t* climb trees,” Mike said quickly. “That’s right! They’ve got, uh, webbed feet so they can’t, you know, grip—”

“Tiger-lizards with horned tails and webbed feet?” Max said. “Wheeler, you’ve got one freaky imagination.”

El giggled and nodded in agreement, meeting his eyes. Mike felt his indignation melt away, replaced by an intoxicating wave of giddiness. El kicked her legs back and forth off the side of their branch, eyes bright.

“We’ll just have to wait them out,” Mike announced to the others. “It

shouldn't be too long before they pick up another scent." He turned to Eleven, carefully sidling a hair's breadth closer. He leaned his shoulder against hers and lowered his voice. "What do you want to do while we wait?"

Dustin watched miserably from his crouched position three trees away. Mike and Eleven's heads tilted toward each other, the space between their chins and shoulders creating a disgustingly cute little triangle. He was too far away to hope to hear if Eleven was talking to Mike, much less count how many words she might be saying. Furthermore, he cursed the heavens, it was simply his great misfortune that he should be mute while Mike and Eleven were, at that very moment, *literally* sitting in a tree.

Will peered up through the branches above his head. Hmm... good width, nice strength to them- and the bark was healthy, no doubt about that. He climbed two circles up and stopped, hugging the trunk to steady himself. He glanced at the nearby trees where his friends dwelled. Amateurs, he thought with a tinge of smugness. None of the others had chosen a flowering tree—how did they expect to survive? They'd be shivering and hungry when the weather turned, begging Will to share his apples with them. Will scoffed to himself. Everyone knew to pick a fruit tree when starting their own tree-dwelling society—

"Mike," El said.

Mike's eyes fluttered open. He raised an eyebrow at her, straightened from his reclined position against the tree.

"Can I have MJ back?" she asked.

"Sure," he said, reaching behind him to snag his bag from the nub he'd hung it upon. "But be careful- you wouldn't want to drop him from all the way up here."

Eleven tilted him a look.

"I just mean- it's quite a long way to tumble," Mike said, unzipping his bag. "We can't expect little MJ to survive the fall."

El huffed at him. “He’ll survive,” she said, holding out her hand.

Mike pulled out her stuffed E.T. and pressed it against his chest, concerned. “Why, just because he’s an alien?” He shook his head at her. “Aliens can be fragile, too, El.”

Eleven snatched her E.T. doll from his fingers. She walked him across the branch between them. “No,” she said, “because he’s strong.”

Mike watched with a smile. “Like his mom?”

The bubble of warmth inside Eleven’s tummy shivered and grew even more bright. She nodded, lips quirking, bringing E.T. up to face her nose-to-nose.

“Interloper!” Max called from the next tree over, startling them. Mike gasped and clutched at the branch beneath him. “Eleven brought E.T. on our quest! Just how many mouths do you think we can feed, young lady?” she demanded.

El glanced at Mike, wide-eyed.

“She’s joking,” he assured her. “I think,” he amended under his breath.

That was good enough for Eleven, who straightened and waved one of MJ’s strange hands at Max.

“Hey, toss him here!” Max said, reaching out eagerly.

Eleven tucked him protectively against her chest and shook her head.

“Aw,” Max deflated, “I guess I don’t blame you. He probably wouldn’t survive the fall.” Eleven huffed in exasperation. “I didn’t know you were such an MJ fan, El,” Max continued. “‘Darkness falls across the land,’” she sang in her spookiest voice, wiggling her spookiest fingers. “The midnight hour is close at hand—”

“Not MJ for Michael Jackson,” El shook her head. “It stands for—”

“Hey, the monsters are gone!” Mike shouted beside her. They looked at him in surprise. “Yep,” he nodded vigorously, pointing down at the

mossy floor beneath them. “I think it’s safe to climb down and continue on our journey.”

“Alright!” Dustin pumped his fist and scrambled down his tree trunk, jumping the last three feet to the ground.

“Hey,” Max pointed at him accusingly.

He held up his fingers- seven of them- and tucked them against his palm with each word. “Mute, but not for long, skip rocks.”

“That’s a pretty good haiku,” Will said encouragingly and swung to the ground after him.

“Yeah, and I agree with Dustin,” Lucas said. He shimmied halfway down the tree, gave a great Tarzan yell, and jumped the rest of the way down. “Let’s find that pond across from Prairie Hill Farms and skip rocks!”

“That’s a good plan,” Mike nodded, brushing bark residue off his hands. “You go on ahead. We’ll catch up.”

Lucas looked at him in consternation. “Aren’t you going to tell us what happens in the story?” he asked.

“Oh, right,” Mike said. “Uh, the tiger-lizards move on toward the Morganthian Mountains and you all gain ten experience points.” They cheered. Max and Will high-fived. “The elf receives a message that the council believes their missing treasure was taken by way of the, uh, Watery Brook,” he finished feebly.

They gazed at him with matching less-than-impressed expressions. “The Watery Brook?” Max repeated and turned to the others. “I think somebody could use a thesaurus for his birthday,” she muttered, flicking her thumb over her shoulder.

They turned and filed through the woods, watching the ground for wet leaves and spiky underbrush.

“That was close,” Mike sighed in relief at their retreating backs and turned to El. “You promised you weren’t going to tell the others,” he said, a tinge of accusation in his voice.

She shrugged. "Sorry," she said, settling her E.T. in the crook of her elbow. "I forgot."

Mike twisted his lips and crossed his arms. "Eleven," he said seriously. "They already tease me, like, *all* the time! I'd never hear the end of it if they found out what you named him!"

"Okay, Mike," El nodded agreeably. She held out the doll, nudging him against Mike's chin. "I promise I'll try to remember not to tell them his real name."

Mike's shoulders loosened. "Thank you," he said and took the toy from her, sliding his bag off his shoulder. "Do you want me to carry little Mike Junior for awhile?"

El nodded. He placed her E.T. carefully in his bag and zipped it up again. He took her hand. They started off through the woods after their friends.

## 8. Chapter 8

### Notes for the Chapter:

Thanks to [onslenderaccident](#) for the beta! And thank YOU for reading! Please leave a note if you enjoy.

Dustin picked his way along the rocky shore. Sweat glazed the back of his neck. Further up the river, a silhouette tiptoed carefully along the line of a crumbling rock wall. He paused to watch Max attempt a pirouette, wobbling dangerously.

Another figure gave a shout and jumped up from the shoreline, raising a hand in warning. Max caught herself and crowed, flourishing her arms above her head in victory.

He bit down a grumble and kicked at the dirt. It wasn't as though he'd hoped Max would fall, and he certainly didn't want to see her injured. But, well, it was just— see, the thing of the matter was— Dustin wasn't all that confident that Eleven would have sprang so quickly to rescue *him* with her super-scary mind powers if *he* were the one on the edge of disaster.

She certainly wasn't too keen on giving him more words to speak. In fact, she seemed to be taking extra-friggin-special pride in being even more of a mute than usual just to stick it to him. He fumed silently.

Whoa: score! Dustin knelt and snatched up a rock. Not too wide, check. Two flat sides and rounded edges, check. Nicely-placed notch to slide between his first two fingers, check. Boy howdy, the tides of fortune might be rushing in to greet him again, because he just found the most perfect skipping rock of the day!

He straightened again, giddy, and opened his mouth to alert the others—

No. He pressed his lips together, jaw tightening: they didn't want to hear what he had to say. They'd made *that* clear enough. And he'd be skinnydipped in hot candle wax before he lost any experience points on this challenge like they thought he would.

It was the principle of the thing. Did they think it was easy being the fun one? The Comedy Man? The ray of light in a cloudy sky? Their party had grown in the past year from three friends to five (not counting himself), nearly doubling his humor responsibilities. It was a lot of work! Was a little appreciation for his efforts too much to ask?

Dustin ran his fingers along the rounded edges of his newly-found skipping rock. He supposed it might be possible that some of his latest performances didn't quite hit the mark. There was that time he tried to pull Mike's pants down in front of everyone, but *of course* it had to be the one day he decided to wear a belt and Dustin had only succeeded in making him lose his balance and fall over. Mike had yelled at him for that ("blood vessels are *fragile*, Dustin!"), and he really did not seem to appreciate the genius behind Dustin's original intention either.

Then there was the time he filled Max's shoes with jelly beans while she and Eleven were painting their toenails, but Dustin recognized right away his error with that one—it was all fun and games until the person who'd been jelly-beaned pulled their foot out of their shoe and everyone had to watch as all those precious sugary little morsels were dumped straight in the trash. That prank was marred by a real edge of sadness, Dustin admitted.

Will hadn't spoken to him for a whole week after he'd snapped a polaroid of him cradled in Shannon Tyler's arms—probably because Dustin was the one who'd tripped him. It didn't help that Shannon was a good ten inches taller than Will with significantly greater upper body mass, but really, Dustin had to pick one of the girls who could actually catch him; he was just looking out for Will's safety.

Was it possible that his friends took issue, not with his incredible comedic timing, but with the perpetual cloud of anxiety that they might be his next victim?

Nah, couldn't be. Dustin glowered as Max jumped off the wall with a spin and bowed gracefully to the others' enthusiastic applause. They just wanted to shut him up and take all the talking-time for themselves.

Well, Dustin tossed his skipping rock in the air and caught it again, they wanted him to talk less and actually *think* before he spoke?

They got it.

He laughed, a great belly-laugh that bubbled up from his toes. His eyes watered, his cheeks stretched with mirth. He threw back his head and shared his delight with the bluebird sky above.

“Dustin?” He snapped around to find Mike standing five feet away, his eyes narrowed cautiously. The others were behind him, watching from a safe distance. “Is everything alright?” Mike swept his gaze up and down the shoreline, then turned back to Dustin. “What’s so funny?”

Chuckling, he pivoted on his toes and flicked his wrist, letting his skipping rock fly. It skittered across the river’s rippled surface, bouncing at least twelve times before sinking. He smiled easily at Mike and pointedly tapped his lip.

“Oh,” Mike shifted on his feet, stuffing his hands in his pockets. “Uh, I forgot to tell you. Time’s up!” He twisted his mouth in an awkward smile. “Good job, Dustin. I was sure you’d collapse well before now. So, you can talk again!” Mike said. “Now, what’s so funny?”

Dustin let out a great sigh of relief, his muscles relaxing until the last knot of tension unwound in his back. He breathed in again, the air damp with promise, the taste of freedom.

“You’ll see,” he said, peering over Mike’s shoulder at the others. “Oh, yes,” Dustin said with satisfaction. “You’ll all see.”

--

Well, that was unsettling, Mike thought. He side-eyed his friend, hoping that he wasn’t going to try to pants him again, or push him in the water, or throw rocks at him, or—

“What’s the next challenge, Ye Great Dungeon Master of Yore?” Dustin asked cheerfully. They stopped at El’s feet, glancing at their reflection in her aviators. Will crouched a little ways away from her, peering from a none-too-modest pile of rocks he’d gathered to the opposite river bank and back. Max and Lucas were alternating between skipping rocks and headlocking each other to the ground.

Mike cleared his throat and waved the others over. Max gave Lucas one last shove before darting away to stand innocently beside Eleven. Lucas stumbled and gave his head an irritated shake. He stepped up behind the girls and settled back on his heels, waiting for Mike’s announcement. Will leaned against his rock pile, knee bouncing impatiently. Dustin gave them all a wide smile and turned to Mike, bright-eyed and bushy-tailed.

“Recent storms have ravaged North Cagalithia,” Mike said. “Fortunately, our party has been shielded from the worst of it by the Morganthian Mountain pass, but the Watery Brook has risen to dangerous levels with more than three times its usual amount of water! The elf has received a message from the Council that the treasure we seek will be found in the greenlands across the river; therefore, we must work together to find a way across—”

They all turned when Lucas gave a great yell and ran for the water, floundering through knee-high water to climb triumphantly upon the opposite shore ten feet away.

“— *without* fording,” Mike continued pointedly. “Seeing as the river is so high, anyone who attempts to ford will immediately be swept away to the Dread Falls and a drop of two hundred feet that no human, elf, gnome or otherwise could possibly survive.”

Lucas stomped his foot, sneakers sloshing.

“How ‘bout a wizard?” Dustin asked, glancing curiously at Will.

Mike paused. “A wizard might survive,” he said, “but he’d have to use all his powers of protection to build himself a shield, and he’d probably end up severely mangled.”

“Whaddya say, Will?” Dustin said. “Wanna go for a spin down the ol’

Dread Falls?”

“No!” Will said. “I’ve got my own plan and it involves zero mangling, thank you very much!”

“Will’s been finding all these rocks,” El observed. “He’s gonna build a bridge.”

Mike surveyed the stone pile behind Will’s legs. He’d collected a surprising amount of rocks with tops flat enough for stepping on.

“Good job, Will,” Mike approved. “Should we haul them end-to-end or set them just far enough apart to jump from one to the next—”

“Excuse me,” Dustin said, smiling pleasantly. “Will the Wise has presented one option to cross the river, but maybe somebody else has another idea. I don’t see why the one to decide should be—does your character even have a name?”

Mike blinked. “Yes,” he said, “of course I have a name.”

Dustin’s smile widened. “Hello,” he stuck out his hand genially, “I’m the human fighter Mogg the Mighty, and you are...?”

“Uh,” Mike attempted to stall for time, but his mind drew a blank. “Derek,” he said finally.

Dustin pursed his lips in consideration. “Aha,” he said, “well, as much of a pleasure as it is to meet you, Derek, I just don’t see why the half-elf outsider should be the one to decide that we’re going with Will’s plan.”

Mike shrugged, shoulders tense. He felt a flicker of uneasiness at Dustin’s strange mood, but harder to ignore was a rising bubble of frustration that they couldn’t just get on with the game like he wanted to.

“Fine. Whatever,” he flicked his hand. “What’s your idea?”

“Oh, I don’t have any ideas,” Dustin said cheerfully. “I think Will’s plan sounds pretty good.”

“So why are you arguing with me?” he demanded.

“Why are you trying to make the decisions about what we do next?” Max popped up and placed her hands on her hips.

Mike looked incredulously from her to Dustin. “I’m the Dungeon Master-” he began.

“Exactly,” Lucas squelched his way back up to their side of the brook. “The Dungeon Master is not supposed to be a character, but we let that slide because this isn’t exactly like D&D- and it’s completely obvious that you’re just trying to flirt with our elven maid.”

“Hey,” Mike protested, “I am doing stuff other than *flirting* ! ”

“Yeah, sure, *Derek*,” Max rolled her eyes. “Look, Mike, we all know you’re good at taking the lead and getting things done, but you can’t be Dungeon Master and Derek the half-elf Ringleader.”

“What do you want then?” Mike asked, frustrated and bewildered. “You don’t want me to play?”

“I think he should be able to outline the story and play the game,” Dustin piped up unexpectedly. Mike’s shoulders loosened half a notch and he shot his friend a mostly-grateful, slightly-suspicious side-eye. “But, in fairness to the rest of us,” Dustin continued, “something ought to be done about his unbalanced role.” He tapped his chin and gazed pensively down the trickling riverbed. Mike felt a prickle of fear. “What if...” Dustin widened his eyes as though a truly inspired thought had just entered his head, “what if Derek had only half the intelligence points of the rest of us?”

“Wh-” Mike started, dismayed.

“Yes, that should do the trick!” Dustin snapped his fingers triumphantly. “That way Derek can still play but he won’t be in charge.”

“Is this about the hour of silence?” Mike turned on him. “You’re mad that you had to be quiet for a little bit, so you’re making me dumb?”

Dustin’s eyes seemed to flash, but then he just smiled and spread his

fingers in appeasement.

“Of course not, Derek, m’boy!” he said soothingly and patted him on the shoulder. “I was interfering with the game by talking too much, I see that now. Think of it like that: it was for the good of the game that you silenced me to unnatural Eleven levels-” he gestured at El, who, true to his statement, had not said a word in the last ten minutes and could very well be asleep behind her aviator shades for all she was contributing at the moment, “and now, it’s in the best interests of the game that you, Derek, should lose half your brain.”

Mike narrowed his eyes, but Dustin just blinked innocently back at him, so he turned desperately to the rest of his friends. Max and Lucas nodded, arms crossed.

“It’s only fair, Wheeler,” Max said, lifting her chin.

“You’ll still be able to flirt with Evenstar,” Lucas said, “I don’t think she’s all that picky about what’s in your head — ”

Will shrugged uncomfortably. “I don’t know, Mike,” he said unwillingly, “I don’t mind you having a bigger part than everybody else, but if they do...”

Eleven bit her lip. This decision was making Mike sad, she could see that, but personally it didn’t much matter to her if Derek was smart or not. Maybe *she* could teach *him* a few things for once.

She took a deep breath, pushed her sunglasses on her head and met his eyes. She nodded.

“Fine!” Mike said, throwing out his hands. “Derek, your half-elf companion, is hereby half as smart as the rest of you,” he pushed the heels of his palms against his eyes.

“Aw, c’mon Mike,” Dustin said, “you can do better than that! Here.” he stepped up behind Mike, placed his hands on Mike’s head and pushed it back and forth while chanting:

“Dumb, dumb, dumb as rocks  
Pick your nose and change your socks,  
Dumb, dumb, dumb as sand

“Why’s that turtle in your hand?”

“Stop it, Dustin!” Mike snarled, jumping away from him. Max and Lucas tried not to laugh. Eleven watched Mike, concerned. Will shook his head solemnly.

“I would just like to point out that that was not a real incantation,” Will said, “and Mogg cannot perform magic because he is not a wizard.”

Dustin shrugged good-naturedly. “Just providing some atmosphere for the proceedings,” he said. “Well, then,” he rubbed his hands together, “should we move on, then? Get started on Will’s bridge?”

“I’ve had an idea,” Lucas announced, brow creasing in thought. “What if we tried jumping across? I mean, I know it’s ten feet, but what if we created, like, a human catapult?”

“Hold your horses, Sinclair,” Max cut him off, “listen to this: what if I stood on your shoulders?”

“That does not sound like the start of a great plan,” Mike tried to say, but they turned as one to glare at him. “Alright, alright,” he backed off, “never mind me.”

Dustin shoved himself between Max and Lucas and threw his arms around their shoulders. “Isn’t this great, you guys?” he said with a wide smile. “Normally, we’d never get the chance to try your brilliant ideas, but everything is different now!” He looked up and pinned Mike with a steady glance. “Maybe we should break into teams,” he suggested.

“This isn’t a competitive challenge,” Mike said. “We have to find a way to get *everyone* across-”

“Hmm, well, we all know Derek isn’t the smartest of the bunch, so I think we should do whatever he says *not* to do,” Max said stubbornly.

“That’s the spirit!” Dustin tightened his arm around her. “Let’s get started on that catapult, eh?”

Mike watched as Lucas bent at the knee at the very edge of the river

bank, cradling his hands in preparation for Max's foot. She backed up to the treeline, giving herself an impressive running start.

Right, Mike thought, *he* was the one with half a brain.

## 9. Chapter 9

### Notes for the Chapter:

Hello after a loooooong break! I'm sorry this took so long. I got distracted by an idea for an original novel I've started working on, but have since finished this fic (hooray!) and will be posting chapters regularly from now on. Thank you for reading!

“One- more- landing to go,” Will grunted, arms shaking. He crouched, rolled the heavy rock between his feet, and lobbed it He-Man style into the river. It plonked into the water, landing at the top of the pile he’d spent the last half-hour constructing. Will stood and wiped his sweaty forehead, too tired even to *whoop* in victory.

“You did it!” El clapped behind him. “Now we can get across without getting our shoes wet!”

Will glanced down at the cool water parting around his evenly-placed rock steps. Sweat trickled down between his shoulder blades. Why was he doing this again? Building rock landings in a ten-foot-wide brook that barely came up to his knee?

*Right*, he reminded himself, squatting down to splash a handful of water on the back of his neck. Because the Dread Falls were just around the bend, and if they so much as dipped a toe in the Swift River, deadly currents would sweep them away. Because of the *game*.

He stood, hopped to the rock he’d just lobbed into place, and leaped again to the opposite bank. He unstuck his shirt from his chest and turned to find Eleven waiting on the last stone landing. Will jumped to the side so she could join him.

“Good job, Will!” she said, taking his hand. “You followed the rules and you were the first to get across!”

He hunched his shoulders modestly. “Only because you helped,” he said. “And you know I wasn’t *really* the first one across-”

Max and Lucas sprawled on the grass a few clicks away. Max's hair was drying in frizzy orange knots, and Lucas' sneakers steamed on a granite boulder. Dustin prowled along the shoreline, fanning himself with a pine bough.

"Good job, Will." Mike stepped up beside them, his long legs carrying him to dry ground, no jumping required. Eleven stood on her tiptoes and whispered in his ear. Mike shot her a bemused look. "We're, uh—" he turned back to Will. "We're proud of you, buddy."

Will rolled his eyes. "Thanks, Dad," he said.

"Right, well," Mike coughed. "We're all across, so let's continue on our quest."

"Hold up," Lucas sprang to his feet. "Our team made it across first. What did we win?"

The air was uncomfortably hot. Will waved a hand to churn up a breeze and glanced at Mike out of the corner of his eye.

"This wasn't a competitive challenge," Mike said, his shoulders tight. He grimaced. "Besides, you and Max were completely drenched, which was supposed to be against the rules."

"Boo!" Max hollered. She got to her knees, turned her thumb down and made a rude squelching sound.

"I *told* you guys—" Mike protested.

"Well, well, well," Dustin cut in smoothly. "Once again, it's Will and El. Great job, you two! How many times has it been now that you've defeated us? Three? Six? Five million and seventy two?"

"They didn't—" Mike tried.

"I guess some people are winners, and others are losers," Dustin continued philosophically. He turned to Max and Lucas. "Maybe it's time to accept our lot in life," he said. "How can we ever hope to compete against these three? We should be happy to be their sidekicks."

Eleven looked at him coolly. “You’re a sore loser, Dustin,” she said.

“Aha, so we *did* lose!” Dustin pointed at her triumphantly.

“Dustin,” Will sighed.

“You heard her,” Dustin turned to the others. “In fact, we should walk a few steps behind them.”

“Quite so,” Max agreed pompously, sweeping an obsequious bow. “Please,” she groveled, “let me but kiss the heels of thy sneakers.”

“Bless us with your wisdom,” Lucas dropped to his knees. “Oh, that someday we may become winners like you, and cast off our loser-ish ways!”

Mike glanced uneasily from one to the other. “We don’t have to keep playing,” he pointed out. “If this isn’t fun anymore-”

“Perish the thought!” Max exclaimed with an odd southern twang. “We know our place, o’ great one, and we follow you. Onward!” She pointed down the river.

Will caught Mike’s eye and shrugged helplessly. He turned his steps northward, trying to ignore the others’ fawning. Mike and El traded glances and joined him.

Max, Lucas and Dustin hooked their arms together and stumbled after.

--

The sun was slicing through the forest beside them by the time they reached the bridge. Lucas sighed in relief at a late afternoon breeze and wondered what his mom was making for dinner.

Mike stopped at the foot of the bridge and turned to the others. He scrubbed a hand over his face and spoke in an ages-weary voice.

“The Elven Council sends their congratulations,” he said. “The treasure you seek is closer than you think. You may, in fact, have passed it on your way. The Council recommends heading back to the

beginning-”

“Double back?!” Dustin exclaimed, outraged. “Retrace our steps? Reverse course?”

“That’s correct,” Mike said, teeth clenched. “The Council believes you will find what you are looking for if you return to the Dragon’s favored lair, which, as all in Cagalithia know, is the Field of Grass and Dirt.”

Dustin scratched his head. Lucas traded confused glances with Max. Even Will and Eleven were stumped.

“The baseball diamond,” Mike clarified impatiently.

“All this just to go back to the baseball diamond?” Dustin demanded. “I thought we were going to climb mountains- swim oceans- sleep under the stars-”

“Nah, I can’t spend the night,” Lucas shook his head. “I told my mom I’d be back before dark and it’s almost sunset.”

“Oh.” Dustin brightened. “What’s she making for dinner? Lasagna? Tacos? Chicken cordon bleu?”

“Man, I don’t know!” Lucas rolled his eyes.

“Can I come?” Dustin asked.

“Uh,” Lucas coughed. “Actually- yeah, I just remembered! She told me this morning. We’re having spinach casserole for dinner, with, uh, mushrooms, and onions, and little cut-up pieces of hot dog-”

Dustin gagged into the river. Lucas winked at Max.

“Anyway,” Mike said, doing a very good job in Lucas’ opinion of sounding only a normal amount of annoyed, and not the head-exploding-into-glittering-crystals-of-dust amount of annoyed that Lucas suspected he was, “to return to the Field of Grass and Dirt, you must take the Bridge of a Thousand Questions-”

“I think you mean the Skinnydipping Bridge,” Dustin interrupted.

“-but a gruesome troll guards the crossing,” Mike’s voice grew louder.

Dustin nodded at the others all-knowingly. “My boy Steve told me that.”

They jumped when Mike threw back his head and howled. He stomped three mighty stomps up the bridge and turned, fists clenched, eyes glittering dangerously. “I ask the questions here, maggots!” he snarled and pounded his chest. One eye squinted menacingly while the other popped wide with outrage. “Who dares seek to cross my bridge?”

They shifted, side-eyeing each other.

“Will Byers!” the troll growled. “Approach.”

Dustin poked Will in the back. He shuffled forward.

“Who are you?” the troll asked.

Will furrowed his brow. “You just said my name-”

“Silence, maggot!” the troll barked, then choked on his spit a little bit. He coughed, wiped his mouth, and began again. “Who are you, *O’ Cagalithian Traveler*,” he said pointedly, “and what is your purpose here?”

“Ooooh,” Will nodded in comprehension. “I’m Will the Wise, a very powerful magician,” he swept a courteous bow, “and this is Evenstar the Fair. She’s a beautiful elf, but I don’t think she really does anything, sorry El- and Mogg the Mighty, a skilled human fighter, he used to be mute but not anymore, and this is Leonid Lefthand-”

“Sir Leonid Lefthand,” Lucas corrected him under his breath.

“Right,” Will nodded. “He’s half-elf, half-human, so that’s pretty progressive, and this is Malinda Maybeard, she’s a barbarian gnome and also a princess somehow? And she has a pet dragon?”

“No, I *am* the dragon,” Max said.

“Okay,” Will shrugged at Mike, “yeah, I don’t get it, either, but we let

her do what she wants. We're on a quest from the Elven Council. We have to get back to the Field of Grass and Dirt and this is the quickest way, so can we please go over your bridge?"

"No!" the troll roared. "Only those who pass the test may cross!"

"Ugh!" Max groaned. "It's summer: no tests!"

The troll glared at her. Max took a tiny step back. Mike's eyes were overly bright. An angry red flush crawled up his neck and glowed on his ears. The air around him shimmered with frustration.

*Whoa*, Max thought. Maybe she should slip him the phone number for Billy's anger management coach.

"Malinda Maybeard," the troll said, "you shall go first. Step forward."

Lucas shot her a sympathetic look. Max traded places with Will. A few steps on the bridge, the breeze from the river was more noticeable. The water burbled happily beneath their feet.

She crooked an eyebrow at Mike.

"Hit me," she said.

"In order to cross, you must correctly answer one question," the troll said. "If you don't know the answer, you may forfeit and pass to one of your fellow travelers. If they answer correctly, they may cross. You, however, must stay behind until you can answer one question."

"Gross," she complained. "This is just like school!"

"It's one question!" Mike near-shrieked, eyes bugging out of his head. He inhaled through his nose, nostrils wide. He crossed his arms and gave her a sickly smile. "You only have to answer one question in order to cross. Do you understand?"

"Yeah, yeah," Max said, then looked at him in exultation. "Boom!" she pumped her arm. "You just asked me a question, I answered, I win!"

"That's not—" he protested.

“Hey, those were *your* rules,” she said.

Lucas hid his smile. Mike was clearly on the edge of a breakdown.

“Fine,” he huffed and stepped to the side. Max pranced down the planks, clicked her heels together, and stood on the opposite bank, smirking at them.

Mike clutched his hair. The troll was slipping into madness.

“Who’s next?” he asked.

“Me,” Dustin said quickly and ran in front of the group. “See?” he pointed at his feet. “I am next, so I answered correctly, so I win!”

Mike stared at him in dismay.

“Boom!” Max called from across the river.

Mike fell to his knees. “Go,” he pointed Dustin down the bridge. Dustin strolled jauntily away.

“Uhm, Mike?” Eleven stepped forward carefully. “Uh- Mr. Troll Mike? Can I go next?”

Mike looked up at her with all the pathos of a drowning man.

“Yes,” he breathed, scrambling to his feet. “Evenstar the Fair,” his voice wobbled, “step forward.”

Eleven shuffled up to him and stood patiently, hands behind her back.

“How long does it take the moon to go around the Earth?” he asked.

Lucas scoffed. “Oh, this is in the bag,” he said to whoever was listening.

El scrunched her eyebrows together and squinted at her feet.

“You got this,” Mike said. “Remember that movie we watched a few weeks ago? The Boy Who Cried Werewolf?”

El shuddered.

“But the guy only turned into a werewolf at the full moon?” he prompted. “And that was once every...” he trailed off expectantly.

“Since when does a troll give clues?” Dustin wondered aloud. He looked like he might continue, but Max elbowed him in the chest.

“Once every...” El tried to remember. “Once every month!” she announced, eyes bright.

“That’s right!” Mike said.

“The big moon goes around the Earth in a month,” she repeated. “But what about all the little moons?”

Mike opened his mouth and paused.

“We’ll go over that later,” he said and swept graciously to the side. Eleven skipped past him and high-fived Max, joining the others across the river.

“I’m next!” Lucas declared, bounding up the boardwalk.

Mike tapped his chin. A sly smile crept across his face.

“A blue light and a yellow light beam down from the sky,” he gestured above dramatically. “When they cross each other, what color do they make?”

“Easy!” Lucas said. “Today’s color is green; thanks, Sesame Street!”

In response, Mike made a rude buzzing noise.

Lucas, who’d made to Egyptian-Walk around him, pulled up short.

“Nice try!” Mike sneered, much too jubilantly. “Byers?”

Lucas’ jaw dropped. He looked between them.

“Blue and yellow make green!” he insisted. “Everyone knows that!”

Mike just hopped on his toes, teeth gleaming. “Will?” he asked again.

“Hm,” Will slanted his eyes up, thinking. “Mixing colors with light is different from mixing with paint. Blue is a primary color, but yellow isn’t. I think if you mix a primary and a secondary you’d get something close to... white?” he guessed.

“Ding ding ding!” Mike announced his correct answer.

“You’re lying!” Lucas accused. “How do you know that?”

Will shrugged. “I read a lot about colors when I tried painting,” he said. “But all my mom could get me were watercolors, so I’m back to pencils.”

“And you?” Lucas demanded, shoving his nose in Mike’s face.

Mike had the decency to take two steps backwards and spluttered, surprised. “Eleven and I snuck into the back of the auditorium and played with the light board one night,” he confessed.

Behind them, Max whooped. “Good-girl El!” they heard her hoot. “I knew you were bad!”

“It was easy,” El said. “I hardly had to unlock any doors with my mind.”

Will edged his way across the bridge.

Lucas crossed his arms. He hated coming in last.

“Fine,” he grumbled. “Let me try again. Give me another question.”

Mike, high on his victory, steepled his fingers together. He settled a querying look upon Lucas.

“What is the theory of relativity?” he asked.

Lucas swayed back on his heels.

“The theory of relativity, uh, is all around us,” he attempted. “Yeah, it’s like... everything is relative, you know, compared to everything else...”

Mike scrunched his nose.

“Pass,” Lucas said, frustrated.

“What is kinetic energy?” Mike asked.

“Pass,” Lucas said again. “Give me an El question: how many days are in a week? Seven, great, I win!”

El paused from spinning in circles and lifted her sunglasses to glare at him.

“What do you get when you multiply two times pi times r?” Mike continued.

“Pass,” Lucas said.

Mike clucked disapprovingly. “What is the square root of 225?”

“Double-pass,” Lucas said.

“What is the Geneva Convention?”

“Pass.”

“What is five plus twelve?”

“Pass- no, wait!” Lucas snapped up straight. “I know that one! Seventeen!”

“Too late,” Mike said. “You already passed. Who was the first to sign his name to the Declaration of Independence?”

“That’s not fair!” Lucas protested. “You tricked me!”

Mike shrugged. “It’s not my fault you weren’t listening. Who was the first to sign the Declaration of Independence?” he asked again.

“Uh- Benjamin Franklin?” Lucas guessed.

Mike scoffed. “Oh, Lucas,” he said, “what are you doing in class all day, daydreaming about your girlfriend?”

Lucas glared at him, offended. “Shut up! We all know how good at school you were last year when El was gone!” He balled his hands into fists. “That’s it,” he huffed. “I’m done with this stupid challenge.” He elbowed Mike to the side.

Mike stuck out his leg. Lucas tripped and scrambled a few steps to regain his footing.

“What the hell, Mike?” he demanded.

“You didn’t answer correctly,” Mike said, words tripping in staccato through his teeth. His cheeks were flushed, his eyes wide, intense. “Just one right answer is all you need to cross the bridge.” The pitch of his voice jumped up and down, song-like. His nostrils were perfect circles, twin dark pits of madness.

Lucas stared at him.

“Whatever,” he shook his head and continued on his way.

“No!”

A gasp caught in Lucas’ throat at the volume of Mike’s scream in his ear, and then his knees struck the uneven wood planks, a weight pushing against his throat. His fingers scrabbled against Mike’s arm, but Mike’s limbs had wrapped their way around him like a tall, gangly spider.

“You can’t- cross- the bridge-” Mike huffed in his ear, “until you- answer- a question-”

Lucas heard screaming nearby, and someone yelling, and another raised voice trying to be reasonable. Closest of all, though, was Mike’s insistent wheezing.

“What’s the capital of Switzerland?” he asked. “How many planets are in the solar system? *When is the fourth of July?!*”

“Get off him, psycho!” Max shrieked, yanking at his arm.

“Mike,” Will’s voice was tight but valiantly composed, “I think you’ve been in the sun too long; you need to let him go-”

“Friends don’t fight,” Eleven muttered anxiously, “friends don’t fight-”

Rage built in Lucas’ stomach and burned down his veins. He gasped a shallow breath of air and with great effort, yanked his body forward. He felt Mike’s foot slip against his thigh, his weight thrown off-balance. Lucas slammed himself backwards and shot to his feet, free. He took a deep, shuddering breath. Max stepped to his side and placed a hand on his arm.

Lucas turned. Mike was sprawled on the ground, mouth wide. His brows were drawn, his face long, drained. His chest pumped with rapid breaths. He looked shocked. Eleven crouched behind him.

Lucas felt his outrage like burning hot fizzy water rising in his sternum. He clenched his jaw. Mike snapped his mouth shut and rose shakily to his feet.

They stared at each other. No one moved.

Then-

“Oh, yeah,” Dustin cawed. “It is on like Donkey Kong!”

## 10. Chapter 10

### Notes for the Chapter:

This chapter was particularly fun to write! Thank you for reading :-)

Steve's sneakers scuffed softly along the railroad tracks. He stuck his hands in his pockets. The air was warm and the locusts had just started singing.

*Every now and then I get a little bit lonely  
And you're never coming round*

Long grasses poked up between the rotting ties and tickled at his shins. He kicked at a dried-out clump of brown reeds and peered through the balding copse of trees on his right to the cornfield on the other side.

*Every now and then I get a little bit tired  
Of listening to the sound of my tears*

He stopped, shielding his eyes from the glare. The corn stood tall and proud, glimmering gold and green in the summer sun. Knee high by the fourth of July? Steve scoffed. More like thigh high. *Oh my*, he thought. *Perhaps I'll die. Or get high.*

*Every now and then I get a little bit nervous  
That the best of all the years have gone by*

He scratched at the mole on his cheek. Now there was an idea. He had a six pack in his bag, but drinking in the sun tended to give him a headache. Plus, all the peeing was a real drag on a first date. He patted his front pocket, checked that this morning's hastily-rolled joint was still there. He wondered if Princess would go for it.

*Every now and then I get a little bit terrified  
And then I see the look in your eyes*

“Are you singing?”

Steve swiveled to the side. Julianne daintily picked her way through the weeds to catch up to him. She was careful to avoid getting dirt smudged between her sandaled toes, and her fingers literally pointed out to the sides like a doll, but she seemed happy enough. She stopped, patted at her forehead and grinned up at him. Steve considered her question.

*“Turn around bright eyes,”* he hummed, eyes widening comically. *“Hey-I-Guess-I-Am-Singing,”* he said on the inhale before barreling on, *“Every now and then I fall apart-”*

Julianne watched, eyebrows raised in bemusement, as Steve bopped his head to the rhythm in his soul, hair flipping majestically to the beat (he may or may not have refined this move to perfection in his bathroom mirror).

*“And I need you now tonight,”* he wailed to her, walking backwards along the railroad tracks, *“And I need you more than ever-”*

*“And if you only hold me tight,”* Julianne crooned, her blonde crown glinting in the sunlight, *“We’ll be holding on forever-”*

Steve grinned at the unexpected transition of his solo into a duet. *“Once upon a time, I was falling in love-”* His foot caught on a broken railroad tie. He stumbled backwards a few steps, arms flailing. Julianne jumped forward and snatched his wrist, pulling him upright. Thank god and Ronald Reagan for Princess, he thought.

*“But now I’m only falling apart,”* she sang, a bit breathless, eyes bright. Steve was soaked through with sunlight. Had he really thought only a few short months ago that his life was over, too bruised by rejection to thrive again?

*“Nothing I can do, total eclipse of the heart!”* they shouted, faces inches apart. Birds took flight from the trees on either side. Squirrels chittered to each other irritably.

“Wow,” Steve followed his impulse and wrapped his arms around her back. He squeezed her close in jubilation. “That was transcendent.”

She laughed. He felt her hands come up to rest on his shoulder

blades. “Yeah, well,” she said, “if you woulda come out for *Grease* auditions sophomore year like I told you to-”

“Oh, god, not this again,” he groaned. He took her shoulders in his hands and fixed her with an earnest look. “When are you gonna accept that it was never going to happen?”

Julianne set her jaw stubbornly. “I don’t see why,” she said, voice rising in a whine. “I had to kiss Brad Buttermouth every night for two weeks, you know!”

Steve nodded, biting back a laugh at the distraught expression on her face. He patted the top of her head. “I know,” he said soothingly, “I’m sorry I couldn’t save you from that. But you’re a really good actress, Jewels; I could hardly tell at all that he looked like a wet trout when you were kissing him-”

“Ugh!” she pushed him away and crossed her arms, pouting.

Steve grinned, rubbing the back of his neck. “You know I thought those scenes we did from *The Crucible* were sick,” he said.

Julianne’s lip quirked. She shot him a mischievous glance. “Sex, sin, and the Devil were early linked,” she quoted, sticking her nose prissily in the air.

Steve’s eyebrows slid up his forehead. He straightened and shook his fist. “How may I live without my name? I have given you my soul; leave me my name!”

Julianne sighed and shook her head. “You’re a natural performer, Steve,” she said, “it’s too bad you’re such a coward.”

“Hey!” he protested, hand dropping back to his side. He was surprised at how much her words rankled. “I had an image to uphold!”

“Right,” she rolled her eyes, “because you’re so cool.”

“Thank you,” he accepted her words as the compliment he was sure she intended (beneath the sarcasm). “I understand you’re still dealing with your disappointment that you never got to see this greased

lightning in full leather.”

She snorted. “Please,” she said, “I don’t buy for a minute that you don’t own a pair of leather pants.”

Steve felt his jaw drop. “How did- why would- what-” he sputtered. Julianne raised an eyebrow at him, smug. “Who told you?” he demanded.

She shrugged one shoulder, nonchalant. “I think the real question is, when am I going to get to see them?” She flicked her hair behind her and turned, sliding him one quick look before sauntering off down the tracks.

Steve watched the ends of her long hair sway against the waist of her jean shorts.

“In case you’re wondering, they look amazing on me!” he called after her. She didn’t turn back, but he heard her laugh float like a summer breeze above the buzz of the cicadas.

He hitched his backpack higher on his shoulders and jogged to catch up.

“Where are we going, anyway?” Julianne asked when he fell into step and bumped his shoulder against hers. She glanced up at him. “And what’s in the bag?”

“Curiosity killed the cat, Julianne,” he said loftily, shaking an errant strand out of his eye.

“Yeah, but did he get a beer before he died?” she asked.

Steve stopped. She noticed a few steps down the tracks that he was no longer beside her. She turned and looked at him quizzically.

Steve clutched the straps of his backpack and narrowed his eyes. “You stalkin’ me or something?” he asked.

Julianne tilted her head. “Why, because I assumed you brought beer on our little excursion into the woods?” she said. “Honestly, it’d be pretty disappointing if you hadn’t, Steve.”

He rubbed his chin. “Well, this is embarrassing,” he said, sliding the bag off his arms. “All I have is Dr. Pepper...”

“Oh,” Julianne said quickly, “that’s okay, I mean- yeah, it’s still pretty early-”

He offered a can and she accepted it automatically, an awkward smile frozen in place. Steve huffed a laugh when she looked down, her expression sliding to recognition.

“You asshole,” she said. “You brought me Stag?”

Steve shrugged, popping the top of his own can. He took a sip. Golden fizz slid down his throat and settled crisply in his stomach. “I drink my beer with the deer,” he tapped his can against hers, then threw his arm around her shoulder. His backpack dangled jauntily from one strap. Julianne took a doubtful sip, then another. Steve chuckled and prodded her gently forward.

“I’m having a blast,” he said, knocking back another gulp. The beer tingled along his shoulder blades. “You’re fun. Why didn’t we hang out more in high school?”

Julianne smacked her lips, evidently unsure whether or not she liked drinking with the deer. “Because you were too cool for drama club, and I played the lead in all seventeen school productions,” she said.

“Right,” Steve nodded. “Yeah, Jewels, I gotta say: you’re a bit intense.”

She snapped around, shoved her nose in his face. “Me?” she demanded, eyes widening dangerously. “*Intense?*”

“Whoa,” Steve backed away, then noticed the smirk hiding behind the beer can pressed to her curling lip. “Hey,” he protested, “you’re scary.”

She took a contemplative sip. “I suppose I can be a bit intense. Seems silly now, doesn’t it? All that stuff we thought was so important in high school, and now we’re leaving it all behind for college and the future. We probably won’t even remember ninety-five percent of it in five years.”

“Julianne,” Steve said solemnly, “I swear to you that until my dying day, I will always remember the way you looked just before Buttermouth gave you a wet one at the end of *Grease*.”

She rolled her eyes. “Hey, Steve,” she said, “not to be intense or whatever, but if you don’t tell me where we’re going, I will tie your stinking corpse to these railroad tracks and leave you as carrion for the crows.”

He shuddered. “Morbid,” he commented. “I dig it.” He weaved her from one side of the tracks to the other, considering his options. He’d planned on taking her to the brook so they could dip their toes in and hang out in the sunshine. It’d been nearly a year since they’d spoken before he’d run into her at the dairy bar the day before. He wanted to catch up, hear about her plans for next year, maybe engage in some good old nostalgia of childhood days gone by. He hadn’t expected her to be so- so-

He glanced down and caught her eye. She lifted her chin and took another swig, unrepentantly holding his gaze. Steve’s eyes were drawn down to her little throat, convulsing gently with each gulp.

His breath caught. He looked away quickly, swiped a knuckle across his wet lips. He could practically feel the smugness radiating off her.

She had the attitude of a belligerent WWE wrestler, he decided. Perfect prissy little princess, who’d played Sandy *and* Dorothy *and* Eponine in their high school musicals, was practically dripping with defiance and looking for trouble.

Steve’s stomach trembled in a delightful kind of terror.

His luck could handle a little testing, he figured.

“I thought we’d go down to the river,” he said, grabbing her wrist and dragging her off the railroad tracks to a path through the woods. “There’s a really nice swimming hole down here, and it’s right by this pretty bridge that leads to Whiteacre Stables-”

Julianne drew to a stop, her arm pulled taut between them.

“You mean the Skinnydipping Bridge?” she asked.

“That’s not- I mean,” he stuttered, forced a laugh. “What?”

She gave him a look. “I have an impeccable sense of direction, Steve,” she said. “I know where we’re going.”

“How do you even know it’s called that?” he demanded.

“How do you?” she returned.

“It’s just- what people call it!” he huffed, exasperated at himself but unsure why.

“So you don’t have firsthand experience?” she clarified.

“Firsthand- uh,” he giggled nervously. “No.”

“Hmm,” she said contemplatively, then stepped around him down the path. “Well, then, maybe I should lead the way.”

An embarrassing squeak escaped his throat. Steve opened and closed his mouth a few times before accepting he had nothing to say and skipped through the forest after her. *Steve: zero, he thought. Julianne: Five million and two.*

Voices bounced off the bustling river and down the sloped path leading up to the bridge. Julianne stood at the lip of the path, half-hidden behind a mid-sized pine tree. Her hair slid along bare arms as she turned at his approach with a rueful look.

“Too bad,” she said, tilting her head at the scene. “Maybe next time.”

“It’s just a bunch of kids,” Steve said, unconcerned. He pushed his way past her, out of the woods and toward the bridge. “I’ll scare them off-”

He halted three steps outside the shaded cover of the woods. A familiar voice rose above the others, scratching along Steve’s spine like rocks on a tin roof.

“It is on like Donkey Kong!” he heard Dustin shout, his voice breaking in excitement.

They were all there, all six of them. Mike stood at one end of the bridge, Will Byers and curly-haired Eleven behind him. Dustin stood with the red-haired skateboarding minx, both helping their friend Lucas to his feet on the other side of the bridge, where, Steve realized, he'd been sprawled on his back.

"Uh- never mind," Steve turned quickly and ducked back into the safety of the treeline. "Actually, there's an old mill just down the river we can climb up and drink our beers-"

"What are they doing?" Julianne poked her head around him to peer up at the bridge. "I think they're fighting," she said, squinting against the sun glancing off the river. "Look, that kid's got blood on his face-"

"Who?" Steve whirled around, glancing frantically between them. "Where?"

Sure enough, a splash of red smeared Mike's chin. His hands were outstretched, fingers splayed, and even from a distance Steve could see the bright spots on his cheeks, his eyes wild.

"-being like this, Dustin?" he thought he heard Mike ask. "Just stop it!"

Lucas took a step forward then, slamming a fist on his chest. Mike backed away a step. Steve stared at the back of Lucas' neck. What were they doing? Were Mike and Lucas actually full-stop knuckles-out brawling? He found it hard to imagine, and yet, here they were, fists raised in full daylight right in the middle of the Skinnydipping Bridge.

Julianne looked from Steve to Dustin and his friends and back again. "Do you know them?" she asked.

Steve's eyes snapped to hers. "No," he shook his head, "I definitely do not know those kids."

Julianne narrowed her eyes, looked back at the bridge. "Yeah," she said slowly, pointing a finger. "Isn't that Nancy's little brother?"

He considered them. Dustin had slung an arm around Lucas' shoulders, and though they were clearly in opposition to the others,

at least they weren't screaming or wrestling or something. Mike had backed all the way to the riverbank with his groupies, and he didn't look happy. He shook his head repeatedly, apparently attempting to persuade the others, though he was too far away for Steve to hear.

They would be in high school next year, Steve told himself. They could resolve their own arguments. They'd have to, he remembered. He wouldn't be in Hawkins to settle their fights or make them stay home instead of chasing after shadow monster dog thingies anymore.

Steve wrapped an arm around Julianne's waist and pushed her back into the forest. "Nancy who?" he said.

Julianne crooked him a look.

"Good answer," she said and slid her fingers in his back pocket.

Oh, yeah, Steve thought. His days in Hawkins were dwindling, and he had every intention to make the most of his last summer in the sun.

## 11. Chapter 11

Eleven's heart snapped painfully in her throat. Lucas was as mad as she'd ever seen him- madder than that day he'd called her 'freak,' even. He kicked at the railing on the bridge, his foot bouncing off the rungs over and over again, while he muttered to Max and Dustin and glowered at the others.

But Mike was the one making her nervous.

He leaned against a banister on one end of the bridge, feet crossed nonchalantly upon the shore where they'd been banished with Will. His back was to the others, and he picked carelessly at his teeth.

Eleven wasn't fooled, though, and she was sure Will wasn't either.

His shoulders were set in a tight rigid line. His jaw popped, veins rising tensely on his neck. His knee bobbed of its own accord.

"He seems really mad," Eleven said. Never an outstanding conversationalist, she was yet possessed of a keen eye for the heart of the matter.

Mike's eyelashes fluttered.

"Who?" he said, knee bouncing, if possible, even faster. "Why? What does he have to be mad about?"

She took a deep breath and knotted her hands together. She really didn't like when Mike was upset. It made her stomach hurt and her head all buzzy and panicked.

"Lucas," she said, determined to make him talk about it. Usually, it was the other way around. Usually, it was Mike drawing words out of her mouth, and her feeling bruised but free at the end. "He's mad because you- you *wrestled* him. Out of nowhere! He wasn't calling you names or being a mouth breather like Troy. And you didn't let him cross the bridge."

"What, that?" Mike fluttered a hand over his shoulder. "That wasn't a big deal. I was pretending to be a troll. And he broke the rules." Mike

pushed his hair off his forehead but didn't meet her eyes.

"You should've said sorry," El decided.

"Sorry?" Mike repeated, color bleeding up his neck into his face again. "I'm not sorry, I shouldn't have to be sorry! Everybody *said* they wanted to play my game, but nobody wants to follow the rules! You think you can just- just cross any old bridge in Cagalithia and not have to deal with the guard troll? Well, ha!" he sputtered a very tense laugh. "Think again."

"We answered your questions," Will pointed out, gesturing between El and himself. "We've been following your rules-"

"I know," Mike said, "but Dustin and Lucas-"

"And even if the others haven't exactly followed the law of the land," Will continued, like Mike hadn't interrupted, "they've been playing along, haven't they? It's not like they've been ignoring you-"

"They've been *harassing* me!" Mike protested.

"So what if they want to set their own challenge or make up the rules here and there?" Will asked.

"No way!" Mike crossed his arms, mouth set mulishly. "They don't get to just change the game whenever they feel like it! How would that be fair to the rest of us- what about you and Eleven?" El looked at her feet rather than meet his frantic gaze. "You've been following the rules. Why should they get to change things and mess it up for you?"

"I think El and I would prefer if we could all get along," Will said. El looked up. Will raised his brow in question. She nodded quickly, flicked a look at Mike, and glanced down at her toes again.

Mike was quiet a moment. He shifted uncomfortably against the post.

"You guys made me Dungeon Master," he said finally. "Part of being Dungeon Master is enforcing the rules. Maybe I shouldn't have tackled Lucas when he went to pass me on the bridge, but they've been pushing me all afternoon, you know they have! It's not my

fault,” he kicked his foot in the dirt.

“Please,” El said softly, “just say sorry to Lucas, and we can finish the game.”

Mike looked up. Please, she pleaded with him in her mind. Let’s run in the sun and laugh, and forget all about hurt feelings and bloody lips.

Mike sighed and looked away.

“I’ll apologize if he does,” he said.

Will threw up his hands. “Great,” he muttered. “We’re never getting out of Cagalithia.”

“Okay,” Eleven said. She glanced down the bridge at the cornfields on the other side. The baseball diamond was few sprints beyond, she knew. Everyone needed to come together to defeat the dragon, save the princess, and win the game, couldn’t they see that?

“I’ll go talk to them,” she said and stepped one foot on the bridge.

“Wait,” Mike caught her wrist. “I thought you’d stay here with me.”

El shook her head. A breeze caught at the neck of her t-shirt and fluttered it against her collarbones. “Gotta tell them what you said—”

“Let Will bring terms,” Mike gestured to their friend. “He’s a good Ambassador.”

El glanced at him. Will rocked back on his heels, hands in his pockets. He looked up at the sky in thought.

“It’s hard to negotiate from a position of self-righteous hostility,” Will said.

Eleven wasn’t sure what that meant, but Mike’s eyes flashed, his jaw tightening. She pointed at him.

“Make love, not war,” she said and shook free of his grasp.

She padded up the wood walkway, the rushing water muffling the sound of her footsteps. Max started when she saw El approach, and whirled around to chatter in Lucas' ear. Dustin leaned easily against the railing. Lucas planted his feet, arms crossed, and set his brow.

Eleven slowed halfway down the bridge, eyes flitting over each of them. She tried not to, but sometimes her mind reached for others automatically, outside her will. Mostly in times of danger- and this certainly counted, El decided. A lot was at stake.

Max's energy was bright and buzzy, tense like Mike but with a giddy edge. Lucas was tired- Eleven could feel his energy seeping away with every breath cycle, bleeding into the air and blowing away in the river breeze. Deeper, though, was a dark gray bruise, his hurt and frustration stagnant like thick red blood underneath. Eleven's heart stuttered to feel it, and her stomach swooped uneasily. She loved Mike, of course she did, but sometimes she wished he didn't have so many rocks in his head.

Last, she looked at Dustin. He'd been so pointy to her, she half-expected to find the moldy black edge of malice on his thoughts, like the bad men and women that had worked for her Papa. But Dustin returned her gaze with bright eyes, and El was relieved to find only a simmering recklessness clouding up his vibrations.

Eleven stopped in front of them. She pushed a curl behind her ear and clutched her hands together.

“Hullo,” she said with a solemn nod.

“Eleven!” Max pounced, throwing her arms around her neck. “How are you? Oh man,” she pulled back, clutched her fingers around El’s arms, “I’ve missed you!”

“Maxine,” Dustin rolled his eyes, “it’s been, like, ten minutes.”

“This is crazy, huh?” Max leaned in and hummed in El’s ear. “It’s all fun and hormonal aggression until someone gets their feelings hurt, amirite?”

“Uh,” Eleven furrowed her brow, “right.”

“What’s up, El?” Lucas butted in. “Did Mike send you? Are we calling it quits?”

Eleven chewed on this. “Calling- it... quits?” she repeated.

“Yeah,” he said, “ending the game, going home, *hasta la vista* and sayonara-”

“We can’t go home yet!” El protested, horrified. “We haven’t saved the princess!”

Lucas tightened his arms around himself. “I don’t think I want to play anymore,” he declared, “not unless Mike promises he’ll stop being such a butthead.”

Eleven’s mouth dropped open at her beloved being spoken of so foully in her presence.

“Well?” Lucas asked.

El pressed her lips together.

“No,” she said, “I don’t think he’ll promise... that.” She twisted her fingers, then brightened. “But he said he would apologize-”

“Really?” Lucas said, arms loosening.

“-if you do, too,” Eleven finished and bit her lip.

Lucas narrowed his eyes, then shook his head and barked a laugh. “I don’t think so! *He attacked me!*”

“Yeah, and he got his butt kicked,” Max said with satisfaction. She stepped away from El to prop her arm on Lucas’ shoulder. “Sorry, Eleven, but Mike is clearly in the wrong here.”

El turned to glance at the other end of the bridge. Mike was still propped against the banister, his back to them. Will had plopped cross-legged in the grass next to him. His hair lifted off the base of his neck in the breeze from the churning waters.

“I know,” Eleven said in a low voice, leaning in close. “But he’s- he’s

just tired, and he started this game for us to have fun and be together. And you guys—" Her eyes flicked pointedly to Dustin. "You haven't been all that nice to him, either."

Dustin shrugged tightly, his devil-may-care attitude showing signs of strain. "Maybe," he admitted, "but you and I have been feuding all day, and we haven't slugged anyone."

"Not yet," she said darkly. Dustin grinned.

"He needs to loosen up, El, and you know it. Would it have killed him to give us points for the human catapult? Just 'cause he deemed it 'reckless' and 'abominably idiotic—'"

"Yeah, I lost three toenails on that challenge!" Max said. "That was totally worth at least one experience point."

"Why couldn't he just let Lucas cross the bridge?" Dustin continued. "He's a control freak. Lucas shouldn't have to apologize for that."

Eleven sighed and tapped her toe. She crossed her arms and drummed her fingers on her wrists. They weren't completely wrong about Mike, but it made her chest tight to think about it. Couldn't they remember the well of generosity and compassion inside him? That was worth far more than a sometimes-compulsion to have things just so.

"We can't quit," she said. "We can't just give up."

But Lucas was shaking his head, weariness etched in the lines of his face. "It's almost time to go home anyway," he said, gesturing at the lowering sun-

"Hang on," Dustin stepped in front of him. "Let's talk for a second." He flicked a look over his shoulder at El. "We'll be right back," he said, and ushered the other two off the bridge and halfway to the treeline. El squinted curiously. They pulled up in a tight huddle and traded urgent whispers. Eleven could have tuned in to their minds to discover what they were planning, of course, but she turned around and gave them privacy.

Will was sprawled on the bridge, propped on his hands behind him.

His head was thrown back, his crown glinting dully at her.

Mike was nowhere to be seen.

Her brow creased. She studied the opposite treeline, searching for his shadow. Or maybe he went for a swim? She leaned over the railing and stared down at the shallows. Where did he go? Her heart squeezed to think of him, wandering off alone with his thoughts-

“So, El,” she jumped at Max’s sudden proximity. The other girl faced her, leaning her hip nonchalantly against the railing. Lucas sidled up behind her, while Dustin crossed to the other railing and hopped upon it, feet dangling. “Your character- Evenstar the Fair- she’s an elf, but she doesn’t have any superpowers, does she?” Max’s eyes darted over her shoulder.

Eleven shook her head, then impatiently blew at a loose strand that fell in her eyes.

“Yeah, so, if she was, like, set upon by a band of vigilantes, she probably wouldn’t be able to get away or do them any damage, right?” Max continued.

El blinked. “Uhm-”

“Hypothetically speaking,” Max said quickly.

El nodded. “Hypo-stetically speaking,” she repeated.

“And, so, if something *were* to happen to Evenstar,” Max shrugged with innocent wide eyes, “you, *Eleven*, wouldn’t hold a grudge against those who made- that- something... happen?”

El chewed her lip. “I’m confused.”

“Come on,” Dustin swung his feet against the railing, “let’s do it already.”

“Yeah, he’s still not back,” Lucas shifted from foot to foot, “it’s only a matter of time-”

“Hold your horses,” Max snapped at them, “I don’t fancy getting my

brain exploded, thanks very much.” She turned back to El, then stooped to put herself at eye level. El stared at her, blue irises dark against the light afternoon sky. “We’ve thought of a way to keep playing,” she explained. “It had to be fair, you see. Mike dealt us a real insult, and if he’s not willing to apologize, then the offense must be returned. Do you understand?”

Eleven nodded solemnly, then stopped. “No,” she said.

Max sighed. She looked up, flicked her head at the boys. Quick as a flash, Dustin jumped down from the bridge and pace behind her. El turned, surprised to feel his hand on her shoulder. Then Lucas was crowding in her other side, and Max was watching her, face carefully set.

“Evenstar the Fair,” she said, “you are officially being kidnapped.”

## 12. Chapter 12

They tripped up the rocky forest path. Thin hemlocks towered above their heads, damping the afternoon sunlight. Sweat cooled rapidly along Max's back. She shivered, threw a cursory glance over her shoulder, and pushed onward.

"Oh man, oh man, oh man," Dustin giggled nervously, fingers still clutched around Eleven's shoulder. He waited for her to find her way around a dusty boulder in the middle of the path, then skipped along behind her. "This is the dumbest thing we've ever done—"

"Shut up," Lucas called back from the front of the group. "This is going to work. Right, El?"

Eleven flicked a curl from her forehead and glared at the back of his neck. "Mike's gonna *kill you*," she said. Max wasn't sure if her voice was foreboding or thrilled.

"I don't know about this," Dustin continued, voice tight. "Mike's a little, uh, extreme when it comes to El. Maybe this was a bad idea..."

"It was *your* idea!" Lucas exclaimed, turning on him.

"Yeah, Lucas," Dustin said, "and that should have been your first clue—"

"Keep moving!" Max hissed, checking behind her. The path had wound them through the woods, so all she saw were crisscrossing branches, the sparkling river no longer in sight, but it wasn't far, she knew. Minutes, or less, it would take Mike to catch up to them. At least they'd disappeared into the trees before he returned- he'd need a minute to figure out what was going on-

Dustin ran into Eleven with an 'oof.' She refused to budge. She planted her feet atop a granite boulder, threw back her head, and shrieked:

"MIKE! I'M OVER HERE, MIKE! I'M BEING KIDNAPPED—"

Lucas sprang to her side, clapped his hand over her mouth, and

hustled her back to the ground. He cursed and jumped back, wiped his hand on his shorts.

“Ow, El, did you *bite* me?” He shook his head. “Ugh, you are so intense- you and Mike both-”

“What did you do that for?” Max demanded. “He’s gonna panic! Did you have to sound so scared?”

Eleven tapped her chin. “Oh, right,” she said. She thought for a second, then took another deep breath. “MIKE-” she tried again.

Dustin yanked on her arm. “Don’t call for Mike,” he begged. “Call for Derek- that way he knows it’s part of the game.

Eleven loosed a long-suffering sigh. “*Derek!*” she hollered. “*I’m being kidnapped-*”

“*Evenstar* is being kidnapped,” Max hissed.

“-but just in the game, I mean I’m not really scared,” El continued, glancing at the others.

“Thanks,” Dustin muttered.

“Save me, Derek!” she shrieked. “I’m over here- in the woods-”

She faltered, staring down the path toward the river. They stilled, listening to the squirrels chittering angrily at their ruckus. Max puffed a breath and tried to ignore the wind whistling between Dustin’s front teeth.

“*Eleven!*” a distant call wound its way through the hemlocks. “*I’m coming!*”

They sprang to life. El’s eyes lit up, and she opened her mouth- but Lucas clamped his hand over it before she could respond. Eleven struggled, mostly for the show of it, Max thought, so Lucas tugged off his bandana and tied it against her teeth. Max jumped forward and wrapped her arm firmly around Eleven’s.

“Let’s go!” she snapped, and then they were hustling up the hill.

Lucas charged ahead, turning back every few moments to wait impatiently for them to catch up. “Oh shit, oh shit, oh shit,” Dustin muttered with every step. Eleven caught her heel with the edge of her sneaker and tripped, landing on one knee. Max helped her back up, then hurried her deeper into the forest. She glanced at Eleven. Her curls bounced every which way and her eyes were bright, two feverish spots burning on her cheeks.

“Eleven,” Max said under her breath, leaning in, “is this okay?”

El rolled her eyes.

“I’m serious,” Max protested. “We can take you back-”

But El shook her head adamantly. She spat out Lucas’ bandana from between her teeth and let it dangle wetly on her chin.

“Mike’s looking for me,” she said.

“Yeah, that was kinda the point,” Max said.

“Mike’s gonna *save me*,” El said, her voice going dreamy.

Max pursed her lips in disgust. “Really?” she said in disbelief. “That’s why you’re doing this? Not to help your good friends prove a point or to finish this godforsaken game?”

Eleven pushed the gag back in her mouth and shrugged.

“Oh, girl,” Max said as they caught up to Lucas at the top of the hill. “You have got it bad.”

Eleven leaned against the trunk of a birch tree and watched the others peer from the shaded safety of the forest to the swath of railroad ties bathed in sunlight ahead of them.

“So,” Dustin wiped the back of his hand across his forehead, “what do we do?”

“What do you mean, ‘what do we do?’” Lucas whirled on him. “This was *your idea!*”

“Hey, I don’t want to step on your rights, man,” Dustin said. “I’m looking for some group input here-”

“Do you think a military general stops in the middle of a mission to ask his men for advice, Dustin?” Lucas demanded.

“Well, that is an interesting hypothetical, Lucas, thank you for bringing it to my attention-”

“Hello!” Max clapped her hands together to get their attention. “We don’t have time for this! Keep moving!” She pointed down the railroad tracks. “Somebody make sure we’re heading in the right direction for the baseball diamond.” The boys immediately began digging for their compasses. Max shook her head. “I hate that I’m gonna say it, but- man, Mike would be so much better at this.”

Eleven tilted her head smugly.

Everyone jumped at the shout that rang up the hill, much closer than Max would have predicted.

“Dustin,” Mike’s voice threatened dimly, muffled by the close-set trees, “when I find you, I’m going to *kill you!*”

Dustin stood in the middle of the railroad tracks, compass raised to the sun. He dropped his arms and looked around with a hurt expression on his face.

“Just me?” he asked the group at large. “What did I do?”

“Never mind,” Lucas jogged down to the treeline to grasp El by the elbow. “Baseball diamond’s this way,” he said, and dragged her from the shadows up to the tracks. He untied the bandana around her mouth, then prodded her in the back to get her to move. Eleven took a few unwilling steps forward, eyes flicking to the forest, searching through the trees. “Faster!” Lucas hissed, pressing his fingertips against her shoulder.

El swung forward and marched irritably down the railroad tracks. *He’ll find me*, she told herself. She reached tentatively down the hillside, searching-

“So, El,” Dustin jogged forward and turned around, walking backwards to face her. Eleven watched, concerned, as he stumbled on the uneven terrain. “Real quick- before Mike gets here- what are we looking for, and what do we get if we find it?”

El squinted at him. “Huh?” she said.

“You know: the thing the Elven Council sent us on this quest to find?” Dustin supplied.

“Oh,” Eleven said. “I don’t know.”

“Hm,” Dustin peered at her suspiciously, then tripped on a loose railroad tie and tumbled, flailing, to his rear.

“Dustin!” everyone exclaimed, but Dustin popped to his feet again, brushing off his hands.

“So, how do we win?” he asked, strolling along beside El as though there’d been no interruption.

“What?” El blinked at this quick turn of events.

“The game!” Dustin exclaimed, exasperated. “How does one go about winning this tripped-out fever dream of a game?”

Eleven scratched her head. “I don’t know,” she said.

“Is it the mission?” he pushed. “The first team to find the Council’s missing treasure wins?”

El shrugged. “Don’t know,” she said.

“Would it be something Mike brought with him today?” Dustin mused, clutching his hair in contemplation. “Maybe he hid it somewhere around the baseball diamond?” His eyes brightened with a dawning idea. “Or maybe he’s been carrying it around in his backpack all day?”

“Dunno,” El sniffed.

“What else is in his backpack, El?” Dustin demanded. “Besides MJ.”

“Yeah, and why do you call him MJ if not for Michael Jackson?” Max butted in. “Never could figure that out.”

Eleven opened her mouth to respond-

“Lemme guess,” Dustin said. “You don’t know.”

“No!” El protested, a little hurt. “I was gonna say, I’m not s’posed to tell you.”

Dustin whirled on her, grasped her arms. Eleven stumbled to a halt. Max and Lucas leaned in, intrigued. “Not supposed to tell me what?” Dustin asked. “Why not?”

“Cause Mike asked me not to,” El said, as though this should have been obvious.

“What- it’s in his backpack, isn’t it?” Dustin said, eyes flicking between hers.

“Well... yeah,” El answered, confused. “He’s carrying him for me-”

“I knew it!” Dustin exulted, dropping his hands. He leaned back and whooped at the sun. “We just have to take his bag and make it to the baseball diamond, and we win!” He slapped hands with Lucas.

“Oh,” Eleven said, realizing there’d been a misunderstanding, “no-”

*“Eleven!”*

She twisted around and stared. Mike climbed up the hill from the woods less than a hundred feet away. Even from the distance, El could tell his color was high, his eyes dark and intense. The others cowered behind her.

Mike stalked down the railroad tracks for them.

Eleven bit her lips to keep from grinning.

## 13. Chapter 13

The blood pulsed in Mike's ears. He was distantly aware of the setting sun sluicing through the trees to his right, the cooling summer air sticky with humidity on his neck. Rocks crunched underfoot between the railroad ties and birds chirruped gaily to one another.

Mike glowered.

He didn't understand where it had all gone wrong. Why had his friends turned against him? They were so close to finishing the game, but instead of following the rules he'd so carefully laid out for them, they decided they'd rather sabotage the whole thing! All his hard work, all their storylines and challenges and experience points: down the drain.

Dustin was the worst, of course, but Mike decided that was just because Dustin was so over-the-top committed to every little gambit he got in his head. Max and Lucas were practically as bad for going along with him. Enablers.

But to steal El away-

Mike clenched his jaw against the itchy cold pit gnawing at his stomach. His hands tightened into fists. Pebbles skittered across the railroad ties where he kicked them.

Lucas straightened from his huddled conference with his partners in crime. They swarmed in front of Eleven, blocking her from view.

"Stay where you are," Lucas commanded, holding up an arresting hand.

Mike paused a moment, briefly considered, then continued on his way.

"I mean it!" Lucas said, voice breaking with tension. "You won't like what's going to happen if you come any closer!"

Mike narrowed his eyes and picked up the pace. He was vaguely aware of sneakers slapping against the wooden tracks behind him.

Will must have caught up.

Lucas crossed his arms. “You’re not in charge here, Mike!” he said. “We have some demands, and you’re going to listen to them.”

Mike scoffed. “Lucas,” he said, “I didn’t hit you nearly hard enough-”

He broke off. Eleven poked her head around Max’s shoulder and blinked at him. The light dappled her eyes, so it was hard to tell, but Mike had the distinct impression that she was reproaching him.

His feet slowed, and he drew to a reluctant halt about fifteen feet away. Will ran up beside him, puffing. Mike set his shoulders and clutched at the straps of his backpack.

“Well?” he slid his gaze from El and stared resolutely at Lucas. “Why are you doing this? What do you want?”

“We want you to learn how to go with the flow,” Max piped up. Lucas side-eyed her but let her continue. “You’re just- so- rigid sometimes-”

Mike blinked in surprise.

“You guys have been arguing with me every step of the way,” he pointed out. “And it’s annoying. What is so hard about following a few rules?”

“What’s so hard about letting someone else pick the rules for a change?” Lucas asked.

Mike shook his head. “You don’t get it,” he said. “There’s a point to the game, it’s supposed to lead to this ending I have all planned out...” He trailed off, eyes flicking to Eleven. She tilted her head at him curiously.

Why was she playing along with this absurd kidnapping plot? It didn’t make sense. El couldn’t be made to do anything she didn’t want to do, not by these three clowns, anyway.

Did she agree with them? Maybe she thought the game was boring, or that he was too controlling-

Mike crossed his arms, stitching his hurt feelings close to the vest.

“Well, that leads nicely into our first demand,” Dustin said, swaggering forward. It physically hurt Mike’s head to keep from rolling his eyes. Dustin crooked a finger gun. “We want to know how we’re supposed to win.”

Mike glared at him. “I’m not telling you that,” he said, cantankerous.

“Oh, c’mon,” Lucas protested. “How’s that even fair? How are we supposed to work on our strategy? What’s the point?”

“Maybe you would have learned the point,” Mike said loftily, “if you had just played along and *listened* to me-“

Dustin flapped his hand impatiently, as though brushing aside this possibility. “What’s in your backpack?” he asked.

“What?” Mike’s hands clutched at the straps of their own accord.

“You heard me.” Dustin gave him the ol’ stink eye and said deliberately, “What – did – you – bring – today – in – your – backpack?”

Mike squinted, confused and suspicious. “What does that have to do with anything?” he wondered.

“The jig is up, Wheeler!” Max struggled forward between the boys and pointed at him. “We know the Elven Council’s missing treasure has been in your bag this whole time! We know you’ve been leading us back to the baseball diamond, where you were going to bestow the treasure upon whoever *you* decided was the winner! Well, think again, buddy,” she lifted her chin haughtily, “because, this time, we’ve out-thought you.” She whipped out her sunglasses from her back pocket and jammed them on her face, even though it was approaching sunset.

Mike’s eyes slid to El. Her eyes were wide, her mouth quirked oddly. She met his gaze and shrugged, pursing her lips in bewilderment. Then she tilted Max a queer look and crossed her eyes. Mike choked down his laugh.

He straightened. A bubble of light rose in his chest, easing his tension. He pushed a hand through his hair distractedly, and was hard-pressed not to notice Eleven's eyes follow the movement, her mouth opening slightly. He raised an eyebrow. She started, cheeks brightening. Mike smirked. Eleven smiled at him, starry-eyed.

Max turned and looked at El, then front again to Mike, and back. "Oh my god," she said irritably, "are you guys seriously doing this right now?" El froze, eyes comically wide. "This is a very important negotiation!" Max insisted. "Please behave yourselves."

Mike nodded. "Of course," he said solemnly, though inside he was feeling quite riotous indeed. Eleven, at least, wasn't trying to pull one over on him or teach him some lesson. He still didn't know why she was playing along with this kidnapping plot, but he'd play along too, if that's what she wanted. It wasn't all that hard to let go of his control over the situation, he realized. Not if it made El happy.

"I'm sorry to inform you that you've been mistaken," Mike announced to the others. "Well, partially. I am not carrying the Elven Council's treasure, but I do hope you will have success and find it at the baseball diamond."

Dustin narrowed his eyes. Lucas shook his head. Max pounded a fist on one hand.

"Can it, Wheeler," she growled. "We know the treasure is your bag, and we know it has to do with MJ!"

Mike was taken aback. "MJ?" he repeated in disbelief.

"Yeah, and we wanna know what MJ stands for! It's a weird name for a doll. You gotta tell us, the wondering is killing me! That's our third demand," Max decided.

"Uh—" Mike's breath hitched oddly in his chest. It took all his willpower not to break out into giggles. He looked at El again. She crinkled her nose and grinned, waiting for his response.

"I'm sorry," Mike glanced at Max. "I don't believe I will share that information at this time."

“Enough of this!” Dustin declared, appraising Mike. “We knew he wouldn’t be amenable to our very reasonable demands. It’s time to do what we came here to do!” He *tut-tutted* sadly. “You’ve given us no choice; remember that, Derek the ungifted Elf.”

Mike rolled his eyes, then stiffened when the others took El by the arms and dragged her backwards.

“El-“ he started, but was cut off by her dramatic shrieks.

“Derek!” she wailed, tossing her curly-haired head back and forth. “Oh, Derek, they’re going to kill me! Save me!”

Mike’s throat tightened at her screams, and he took a few automatic steps forward before he paused again, watching in confusion.

Lucas wrestled her down to the railroad bed, getting a smack to the nose for his efforts. El kicked and thrashed so wildly that Dustin had to jump in and wrap a restraining arm around her ankles.

“Eleven, jeez,” Mike distinctly heard him say. “Easy on the theatrics, you’re gonna hurt somebody!”

Max, Lucas, and Dustin crouched beside her, and then Mike couldn’t see what they were doing to El, and his brow was tired from all its confused furrowing, and he took a few more tentative steps forward-

“HA!” Dustin jumped up and jabbed a finger in Mike’s direction. Max and Lucas followed, crossing their arms in satisfaction. “As punishment for your unprovoked attack on Lord Leonid Lefthand,” he acknowledged Lucas with a nod, “we have stolen your lady Evenstar the Fair and tied her to the railroad tracks!” They parted to reveal Eleven lying with her feet bound messily to the tracks by Lucas’ bandana. Her hands weren’t tied by anything, but she pressed them to the wooden boards by her head and whimpered convincingly.

“Oo-kay,” Mike said, surveying the scene, a bit nervous but unsure about what.

“And there’s a train coming!” Max announced.

“These tracks aren’t live-“ Will said, sounding nearly as confused as

Mike.

“Yes, a Cagalithian cargo train heading for Galhadrom,” Max continued pointedly, glancing at her bare wrist, “and it should be here in about, oh, one minute!” At this, Eleven let out a very high-pitched, very distraught screech.

“No no *no!*” she begged, eyes squeezed shut. “Don’t leave me here—don’t let me be smushed by the train—”

“So we’ll give you a choice, Derek the Ungifted: either you give us your backpack and everything inside it right now, and we let you save your lady Fair,” Mike narrowed his eyes, “or we all stand here and wait for the train.”

The afternoon sun was nearly white as it sank into the woods. El’s moans mingled with the start of the evening bird calls.

“Tick tock,” Dustin said, then tucked his hand behind his ear. “What’s that I hear?” he exaggerated a tilt of the head. “Is that the sound of a steam engine and great big iron wheels—”

“Yeah, alright,” Mike sighed, slid his bag down his arms and held it out wearily. Max darted forward and yanked it from his grasp. She whooped and lifted it over her head in victory, red hair streaming behind her.

“C’mon, Byers,” Max called over her shoulder as she swerved around the others and pounded down the railroad tracks for the baseball diamond. “You’re not gonna wanna stick around for this!”

Will glanced at Mike and apparently reached the same conclusion. He galloped along the side of the tracks after the others. Lucas waited for him to catch up and slung an arm around his shoulders. They took off behind Max and Dustin, already fighting over who got to carry the bag the rest of the way.

Mike waited for them to round the bend, then scuffed across the boards to Eleven. He crouched beside her and picked a sweaty curl out of her eyes. She blinked up at him, those crinkles he loved so well creasing the bridge of her nose.

“How come you’re being so silly, huh?” he asked.

She pressed her lips together and considered. “Wanted to,” she shrugged.

Mike huffed a laugh and sat beside her. Eleven forgot she was supposed to be tied down and shifted closer. He tugged at the hem of her t-shirt, wrapping his fingers in the fabric.

“You were right,” Mike said. El quizzed him with a look. Mike sighed, ran a hand over his face. “I should have backed down after the fight. I should have just apologized and let them do what they wanted.”

Eleven leaned her head against his knee. “Maybe,” she said, voice muffled. “But they were being buttheads.”

“Eleven!” Mike laughed. “Where does such a fair lady learn such foul words?” She grinned up at him so wickedly that Mike briefly lost the power to distinguish up from down or El from anything not-El. His heart skipped in his throat. Sometimes when Mike was alone with El, he could find himself overwhelmed by a rush of sensation so strong he thought he might puke. He swallowed down any threats of lovelorn nausea and frowned.

“But why’d you go along with them?” Mike asked. “I was worried—not that you were in danger ‘cause I know you’ve faced much worse than those jokers,” El rolled her eyes, her lips curved in a smug little smile, “but... I worried- I thought you were mad at me.”

El shook her head. “No,” she said. “Just seemed like fun.”

Mike leaned back. “Fun?” he repeated. “I didn’t know where you were, or what you were doing!”

“Yeah,” El said dreamily, “you had to find me and save me.”

Mike stared at her. She played with his hand, brushing her fingertips along the lines of his palm. Her eyes floated from his fingers to his shoulder, his mouth, and up. She stilled when she met his gaze, pupils widening.

“I knew you would,” she whispered.

Mike thought of the girl he found in the woods in an oversized t-shirt, drenched and alone. He thought of that building and the linoleum and the room with bare walls, a cot shoved in one corner. He thought of the dark place, and her terror to be alone again, and how she'd gone there anyway, to save a bunch of people she didn't know from being hurt- to save *him*-

His heart burned, and it was sweet, and it was painful, and he didn't know what else to do but gather her up in his arms and press his mouth to hers. She clung to his shoulders and made a happy little sound that snaked its way down his spine.

He could feel his arms shaking when he pulled back to look down at her. He'd wanted to say something, but his mind buzzed stupidly at the sight of her lidded eyes, the dreamy smile on her wet lips-

"Eleven," his voice broke, so he cleared his throat. She blinked lazily and gazed at his mouth. He tightened his arms around her, clutched his shaking hands behind her back. "You're the one-" he swallowed down a tremor, "*you're* the one who's always saved *me*," he said.

"Hm," El tilted her head. "No," she decided. She leaned forward and pressed her face to his chest, squeezing around his middle. "You save me, and it's very romantic."

He laughed. He felt dangerously giddy. He hadn't had much air to begin with, and now El was squeezing the rest of what was left from his lungs. "You don't remember the length of a moon cycle, but you know 'romantic?'"

"Hey," El protested against his shirt, "I know the important things."

Mike straightened. "I have an idea," he said and tugged impatiently at the bandana around her ankles. He pulled her to her feet and scooped her up like he'd seen countless heroes do in the movies. El giggled and kicked her feet delightedly.

Mike stumbled a few steps down the railroad tracks.

"El," he said regretfully, "I think you'll have to get on my back." He set her down and stretched his bicep, eyeing it distastefully. "Maybe

next year," he said.

He crouched so she could clamber up on his back. He staggered forward, then hitched her higher, tucking his forearms beneath her thighs.

Eleven laughed in his ear, brushed her cheek against his.

They made their way down the railroad tracks as the first few golden rays of sunset filtered through the trees.

## 14. Chapter 14

Dustin clanked up the rusty metal bleachers. When he reached the top step, he looked again toward the dusty road winding its way through the woods to the baseball diamond.

The setting sun glanced through the trees. Dustin tapped his foot impatiently. It was almost time to go home, and still no sign of Mike and Eleven. What were they doing that was taking so long? Scratch that- Dustin didn't want to know.

*So Long, Farewell, auf Wiedersehn, Goodnight...*

Ah, well. Maybe his mom would let him watch *The Jerk* again tonight. He brightened a bit and jumped up on the top railing, winding his ankles through the rungs.

Lucas, Will and Max stood guard over Mike's backpack in front of the overgrown dugout. They stood in a little circle with the bag at their feet, playing a riveting game of *Rock, Paper, Scissors*. Dustin wasn't sure how that worked with three people. They'd called him over to join, but the game suffered from a decided lack of strategy, treachery, and murder, so he'd bowed himself out.

Speaking of treachery and murder, what tack would Mike take when he and El arrived? He'd probably try to pull the wool over their eyes again and say it wasn't in the bag, Dustin mused. As though they hadn't out-thought him and stolen the treasure right out from under his nose!

Dustin started when he realized that his friends had abandoned their game and were standing shoulder-to-shoulder, facing the road. Brave Malinda Maybeard of the frizzy dandelion hair, hand resting upon the hilt of a stolen stick sword. Lord Leonid the Lefthand, still lousy at detective-work, slid his aviators in place (even though the skies were dimming). Will the Wise raised his hand and waved enthusiastically. "Hi, guys!" he called before Lord Leonid elbowed him in the ribs. Behind them, two figures had just emerged on the road.

So, Evenstar the Fair had survived, Mogg the Mighty noted. She

hadn't been flattened by giant Cagalithian train wheels. He admitted a flicker of relief at the sight of her walking onto the baseball diamond, hand-in-hand with Derek the Ungifted. They seemed lighter, Mogg thought. Less rigid, not so buckled under the weight of the game. Evenstar skipped to greet Will the Wise, throwing an arm first around him, then upon the resolute shoulders of Malinda Maybeard. The ungifted elf stood nearby, hands in his pockets, a small smile touching his lips.

Dustin narrowed his eyes.

Shouldn't they be more nervous? More tense? Their enemies had run off with Mike's backpack, after all. Had they gained perspective? Decided that perhaps there were more important things than herding a group of six adolescents through the levels of an impromptu outdoor RPG?

Dustin jumped from the railing and clanked down the bleachers.

"You've arrived," he remarked with characteristic bluster and approached his friends with arms open wide. "Welcome—"

"Hi, Dustin!" El bounced on her toes.

"-to your doom," Dustin finished and stopped a few paces away, hands on his hips. "Hi, El," he sighed.

Mike nodded at him, then clapped his hands together. "Okay," he said, "my original plan was to have the fellowship arrive at the Field of Dirt and Grass together, only to find the dragon in roost—"

"-but since we've outsmarted you and found the treasure, you have to crown us the winners instead," Dustin interrupted.

Mike scratched his head. "Uh," he said, "what?"

"Don't play dumb, Wheeler!" Dustin jabbed his finger in Mike's face. "It's creepy when you do it, and you can't pull it off!"

Mike blinked at him. "Dustin," he said, "I'm not following you—"

"Ugh," Dustin shuddered. "I just got the chills, gross." He paced down

the line in front of the others, feet coming to a halt beside a worn blue backpack discarded in the grass. Dustin crossed his arms and tapped his toe significantly. “Well?” he drew out the word extra-obnoxiously when Mike didn’t say anything.

“Well, what?” Mike replied. “I told you guys back on the railroad tracks that the treasure wasn’t in there.” He picked at his fingernails. “I’m surprised you didn’t violate my privacy and go through it already.”

“Oh, we did!” Dustin declared. “And we claimed everything in it, so the treasure is ours, even if we’re not exactly sure what it is!”

Mike’s lips turned down. “When you say you *claimed* everything in my bag,” he said slowly, aghast, “what *exactly* do you mean?”

“Licked it,” Dustin shrugged.

“You guys!” Mike whirled on the others. “That is disgusting-”

“No, I’ll tell you what’s disgusting,” Max said, pushing stray flyaways behind her ears like she was ready for a fight. “Raisins and celery, that’s what!”

Mike rolled his eyes. “I’m guessing you still ate them,” he said drily.

Max puffed incredulously. “Well, I mean, *yeah*,” she said. “But somebody’s gotta show you the beef jerky aisle, that’s all I’m saying.”

Eleven knelt beside the bookbag and peered inside. She stuck a hand in daintily and pulled out her stuffed E.T. doll.

“You- you-” she looked at E.T., brow creased in worry, “you licked MJ?”

“Uh,” Dustin coughed, a trickle of shame sliding into his stomach. He kicked at the dirt. “Yeah.”

Eleven stared at him, wide-eyed, then turned back to look at the doll. She broke into giggles, friendly little chitters that tumbled and bounced around them.

“He musta- musta been,” El gasped, “so pleased to be licked!” She pressed the doll to her chest and nuzzled him. “MJ *loves* attention,” she informed them, and kissed him on the nose.

Dustin felt, on the whole, that this exchange required a hearty side-step.

“Give it up, Mike,” he demanded. “Just tell us which of those things in your bag is the treasure, and then we’ll fight the dragon and go home!”

“It’s not in my bag,” Mike insisted. “I haven’t been carrying it around with me; I wanted everyone to discover it together. Let me explain—”

“It’s in here, I know it is!” Dustin declared, sweat gleaming on his upper lip. He pounced beside El, ripped open the top of the bag and plunged his arm inside. “What about—” he fished around for a moment, then pulled out his hand, “*this?!*” he finished victoriously.

He held aloft a thin paperback book so wrinkled and flimsy that he half-expected pages to start floating away in the breeze.

“That’s *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*,” Mike replied.

“Interesting,” Dustin said, thumbing through it. “Planning a trip, are you?”

“No,” Mike said.

“A *-ha!*” Dustin pointed the book at him. “So why carry around a guidebook, hmm?”

“C’mon, Dustin,” Mike said. “I *know* you’ve read it.”

Dustin glowered. The birds chirruped their annoying little evening songs, and the glowing sun dipped into the horizon. Lucas shifted on his tired feet and thought longingly of dinner.

“Yeah, fine,” Dustin muttered finally, glancing again at the cover. “It’s been, like, three years though. Why’d you bring it today, anyway?”

Mike shrugged. “Me and El are reading it,” he said.

“El and I,” Eleven corrected him.

Everybody stared at her, amazed.

“What?” she said. “Mike’s teaching me to grammar better.”

Eleven had a good group of friends who liked her very much, and not one of them commented on that.

“Okay,” Dustin turned back to Mike’s bookbag. “Then the treasure must be-” he rooted around inside, “-*this*... picture of a purple flower in a yellow vase.” He studied the pencil markings. “El, did you draw this?” At Eleven’s nod, he whistled, impressed. “The shading here is really great, look how it matches up with the light coming in from the corner, just exquisite...”

“Will’s been teaching me ‘bout angles and horizon points and stuff,” Eleven said, an extremely gratified look on her face. “You can kinda see where I drew the ‘rizon point, there, see?” She pointed. “Then I erased it, but Will says every mark you put on the paper becomes part of the final picture.” She leaned in, squinted. “But I think it’s just ‘cause I didn’t erase hard enough.”

“Dustin,” Mike said, “let me explain-”

“Explain?” Dustin said, now sweating profusely as he upended Mike’s backpack and shook its contents onto the ground. “Oh, sure, go ahead and explain... how *this* has been the treasure all along!” He popped up and thrust a spotted banana triumphantly in the air.

Mike shook his head sadly. “I think you’ve really lost it this time,” he said.

“Alright,” Max said, “so the treasure isn’t here, whatever,” she flicked a hand impatiently at the mess by their feet. “Who even cares about that anymore?” Dustin squawked with indignation. “No one, that’s who,” Max said decisively. “The real mystery here, which, Eleven, you’ve gotta put me out of my misery and just tell me already, is: *What does MJ stand for?*”

Eleven's eyes widened. Her mouth dropped open. "Uh," she said, eyes flicking to Mike. She dug her toe in the ground and squeezed MJ in the crook of her arm. "That is- well," she stammered nervously, "the thing is... it doesn't stand for anything," she said at the same moment that Mike piped up and said, "It's none of your business."

There was a pause. Max narrowed her eyes.

"It doesn't stand for anything, and it's none of our business?" Lucas repeated, regarding them suspiciously. "Which is it?"

"What Mike said," El replied quickly, just as Mike answered, "Eleven's right."

"Uh," Mike huffed a tense laugh. "It doesn't matter. I mean, it doesn't have anything to do with the game-"

"Oh no?" Dustin tilted his head, eyes clamped on the little alien tucked beneath Eleven's arm. "Because I'm beginning to think that maybe it has *everything* to do with the game." He ducked into an impressively quick forward roll, smearing dust all over the back of his t-shirt, popped up on his feet, and snatched E.T. by the foot right out of El's grasp.

"Hey!" she protested.

"Dustin," Mike said in warning. Dustin backed away, holding E.T. out threateningly.

"We won, didn't we?" he asked, gesturing the alien at Max and Lucas. "We found the treasure *and* we licked it, so it's ours, indisputably! Say we won, Mike, or MJ gets it!" He held the doll over his head, hands twisting at the flat head and stubby feet.

Eleven gasped, fingers pressed to her lips, eyes trained on the hostage.

Lucas shook his head. "C'mon, Dustin," he said. "That's not cool."

Dustin shuffled a few steps backwards. His heel caught on a rock jutting up from the ground, and he stumbled, E.T. flailing as he fell. The doll caught the brunt of his weight, smushed in the dirt beneath

his rump. Eleven moaned, distraught.

Dustin scrambled to his feet, giving MJ a cursory brush-off. Mike advanced on him, with his stormy mad-Mike eyes. Dustin quickly thrust the doll forward again.

“I mean it, Mike!” he insisted. “MJ is mine until you say we won! Just say we won,” his voice lowered, beseeching.

“Why can’t you *listen*, for once?” Mike demanded. “The point of the game was always to come back here to the baseball diamond, to come back as a team to find the treasure *together*, by facing our common-”

“No!” Dustin banshee-shrieked. He turned on his heel and ran to the side of the baseball dugout. “I don’t believe you!” they heard him shout into the wind.

He disappeared around the corner. They stared, concerned.

“Where did he go?” Will wondered aloud.

Mike was about to respond when Dustin’s curly head appeared atop the sloped roof of the dugout. One hand clung to the ridge pole, followed quickly by the other, still clutching at MJ. Dustin’s lips were pressed together, his eyes trained to the rotten shingles beneath him. He swung one leg over the precipice, straddling the apex.

“Oh my god,” Max breathed, worried and, Mike suspected, a little impressed at his recklessness.

“Dustin!” he yelled, heart jumping in his throat to see his friend so high on such an unsound structure. “Get down from there, you’re gonna break your neck!”

“Don’t hurt MJ!” Eleven shouted, fists clenched. Mike side-eyed her priorities.

Dustin pulled his feet under him and stood up. He swayed dramatically. Everyone gasped.

“Tell us, Mike,” he demanded. “Tell us what MJ stands for. Tell us we

found the treasure. Say we won!"

"Fine!" Mike exploded. "You won, you're the best player I've ever seen, your farts smell like lemon cakes, I *never* want to wring your neck, you found the treasure, it was MJ all along, bravo, you win, now GET DOWN!" These last two words he roared, and the echo of his shout rang up the metal bleachers to resound in Dustin's ears, clawing their way into his clouded brain.

Dustin looked down, suddenly aware of the slippery moss across half the roof's surface. The ground seemed much further away- and much harder- than when he'd climbed up the other side. He crouched and plopped his bottom back down on the ridgepole. He squeezed E.T. in one hand, the other clutching beneath him. He bent his knees and scraped the bottom of his sneakers along the roof until he found a firm stance. Shingles flaked beneath his feet, little pieces skittering away and showering the first row of benches inside the dugout.

"Well," he gulped, his voice tinny to the others from the distance, "since you asked so nicely-"

His hand slipped. Off balance, he turned into the ridgepole, and his hip caught on an unseen patch of moss. Dustin gasped, swallowing the rest of his words.

There were screeches below. Someone shouted his name. Dustin slid against the moss, scrabbling at rotten shingles. His knees scraped ruthlessly against the sandpaper-coarse surface as he tried to haul himself back up to the ridgeline.

His free hand found a hold, but his fingers were clammy. He kicked his feet desperately. Dustin's heart was pounding in his ears. His stomach had dropped to somewhere around his butt. With a great heave, he swung his other arm up and grabbed for a firmer hold. He was dimly aware of the E.T. doll tumbling end over end down the roof, discarded when he couldn't hang on one-handed any longer. There were more screams, but Dustin ignored them. He was about to haul himself up, when-

"MIKE JUNIOR!" Mike's anguished shout reverberated around the baseball diamond.

“Wait, what?” Dustin twisted around. E.T. bounced off the ledge of the dugout and out of sight. Everyone stared at Mike, including Dustin, so he didn’t have time to react when the shingle in his white-knuckle grip peeled clean off the side of the roof.

Dustin yelled, flailed, and slid straight for the ground.

## 15. Chapter 15

### Notes for the Chapter:

Thank you for following along, and my sincere apologies for being such a sporadic updater. I hope you have enjoyed this story in the long wait for season 3. :-)

Feel free to follow me on [Tumblr](#) if you're interested in painfully slow updates on the progress of my novel, *First Generation*.

Eleven jumped forward just as Dustin rolled off the ledge. It was only ten feet up, but he'd gathered so much speed that she had to stretch her focus like an elastic band to catch him before he hit the ground. He yelped and kicked his feet, eyes squeezed shut for impact. Eleven rolled her eyes and let him fall the last six inches.

"Oof!" he groaned and rolled onto his back. He lay there for a few moments, eyes locked on the graying sky, chest rising and falling with ragged breaths.

Max let out a low whistle. "Damn," she said, blue eyes shining. She considered the scene before her, nodded to herself and said, "This has been the best, most wack-o and at-times-terrifying game I have ever played!" She put her hands together and clapped.

Eleven smiled, brushed a sweaty strand of hair from her forehead, and clapped with her.

Will whooped and joined in, and of course Lucas could not stand silently by without whipping out his obnoxiously loud applause. Max leaned in and clapped extra-hard in his face, so he put his hands together right by her ear. Mike grinned, at this point a bit slap-happy, and joined them, stomping his foot to the beat.

"This is weird!" Dustin complained from his prone position, eyeing his friends gathered in a circle around him, clapping their brains out.

“Seriously,” he continued more loudly when they showed no signs of stopping. “Is no one going to say anything about the fact that the words ‘Mike Junior’ were screamed when I dropped E.T.?”

The applause died down awkwardly. Will glanced nervously at Mike, who just shrugged and studied his nails. Max and Lucas weren’t applauding, *per se*, but neither could let the other have the last clap, so they continued slapping their hands together one after the other in a vaguely threatening fashion.

Eleven prowled around Dustin, scanning the ground.

“Where is Mike Junior, anyway?” she asked, looking back and forth.

“So you *did* name him that!” Dustin sat up and pointed at her. He gazed around at his friends, eyes wide, waiting for the others to join in on teasing Mike and Eleven, but no one said anything.

“Dustin!” Eleven squawked, pulling at his arm. “You’re sitting on him! Get up, get off Mike Junior right now!”

“Oh-” he twisted around onto his knees. E.T. lay sad and smushed, smack-dab in the middle of Dustin’s butt-print in the dirt.

“First you lick him, now this!” Eleven snatched the doll into her arms. “You’re a- you’re a *bad uncle*, Dustin!” She tucked E.T. under her chin and whirled around.

Dustin watched her stomp across the baseball diamond toward the old weather-beaten scoreboard. “Uncle?” he repeated dumbly. “But-nobody told me!” He turned helplessly to the others.

“Nice going, Dustin,” Lucas shook his head. He trudged a few steps away and muttered, “Reckless extraterrestrial endangerment-”

“Sounds like you lost your visitation rights,” Max informed him. She stuck her nose in the air and followed Lucas.

“Sorry, Dustin,” Will said. “But you’re probably just not ready for this kind of responsibility.” He patted his arm gingerly, then hopped to catch up to the others.

Dustin looked at Mike. “What-”

“It was teamwork,” Mike said, picking up the thread of a conversation that Dustin hadn’t been aware they were having. “The treasure was teamwork.”

Dustin’s eyebrows slid halfway up his forehead. “The treasure was what now?” he asked.

“Teamwork!” Mike tossed his hands in the air. “It was never MJ or something in my bag or hidden in the forest. I told you that! We were supposed to come back here and save the princess *together*, and then we’d be notified by the Elven Council that the element of teamwork had been successfully returned to Cagalithia. Everyone wins, the end!” He put his hands on his hips. “Or, everyone *would* have won if it wasn’t for your meddling-”

Dustin scrunched his nose, disgusted. “Oh, Mike,” he shook his head. “That is without doubt one of the worst things I’ve ever heard.” His eyes widened as he contemplated the depth of Mike’s corniness. “Who are you, anyway?” he asked. “Class President of the second grade? An over-enthusiastic recess supervisor? Somebody’s radical dad?”

Mike paused. His cheeks warmed. “That’s not-”

Dustin eyed him. “Why would you put a moral into the ending of our RPG?” he asked, revolted. “Who wants to learn stuff over the summer?”

“Hey, now,” Mike said. “It’s important to keep up with your studies. You don’t want to be rusty on your first few days of high school.”

Dustin stared at him. “Oh my god,” he said. “You’re totally being a rad dad right now.”

“I am not!” Mike protested, blood rushing to his face.

“Rad dad alert!” Dustin announced, cupping his hands over his mouth like a megaphone. “Warning: Mike’s gonna check your homework before you can watch TV-”

Mike threw an arm around his neck and swiftly sidestepped him into a headlock.

“Dustin,” he said, setting his chin upon Dustin’s curls while his friend struggled in vain, “I’ve been meaning to have this talk with you for a while now. We’ve all agreed that it’s time you step up and start taking more responsibility-”

“Aw,” Dustin gasped, “don’t make me do chores- you know how I whine-”

“That’s why we’ve decided to ask if you would be MJ’s godfather,” Mike said.

Dustin paused, clutching at Mike’s forearm against his throat.

“Are you makin’ me an offer-” he started, voice husky.

“Don’t,” Mike warned, tightening his grip on Dustin’s throat.

“An offer-” Dustin wheezed, “-I can’t refuse?”

“MIKE! DUSTIN!” Mike looked up to see Max waving her arms at them from across the field. “ARE WE GONNA FIGHT THE DRAGON OR WHAT?”

Mike reluctantly released his chokehold on Dustin.

“Mike,” Dustin said, voice thick with tears (probably from being strangled), “I would be honored-”

“That’s great, could you do me a favor?” Mike said quickly. “Go tell Eleven, and really make it good- I want all the theatrics: on your knees, crying, sweating profusely-”

“I do anything for the family, you know that,” Dustin clapped him on the shoulder and zipped across the baseball diamond. Mike stuck his hands in his pockets and strolled along at less than half his pace, smiling at the dandelions.

Max had shimmied up the post of the old scoreboard and was straddling the top when Mike reached the others. She squeezed her

legs around the ledge, threw back her head, arms wide, and screeched at the sky.

“Hey, what if the dragon and the princess were friends?” she said when she finished her roar.

“Max,” Mike groaned, “what would even be the point of that?”

“Uh, feminism,” Max said. “Ever heard of it?”

“The real question is, how are we going to catch the dragon up there,” Lucas mused, tapping his nose in thought.

“Okay, stay with me here,” Dustin said, eyes darting from Lucas to the scoreboard. “I stand on your shoulders-”

“Nope,” Lucas shook his head.

“Fine,” Dustin said, “we’ll have Will do it-”

Lucas gave Will a quick once-over, then nodded, decisive. Will shifted uneasily.

“I dunno,” he started.

“Don’t worry,” Dustin cut him off. “Eleven will stand watch in case anyone falls, won’t you, Eleven?”

“Yes,” El said, “but just ‘cause I’m here doesn’t mean you should be stupid-”

“Of course it does!” Dustin looked at her, surprised. “What do you think friends are for?”

“To watch *Star Wars* with,” she said. “And to eat Eggo Surprise with. And to help with your homework. And to play games with outside when it’s sunny. And to take you to the spitting rock, and to watch over your dolls when you can’t-”

“That’s all true and good,” Dustin said. “But you’re forgetting the most important thing that friends are for.”

Mike rolled his eyes but waited, a small smile curling his lips.

“Friends are there so you can make dreams happen by working together,” Dustin said. “And right now we gotta figure out how to take down a dragon without anybody getting mangled, *capiche?*”

Eleven nodded, eyes bright. She stepped behind Will and put her hands up in a ready position. Dustin stepped in front of Will and bent at the knees. Lucas cradled his hands together and held them out to give Will a boost.

“Wait,” Mike said. Everyone froze. Mike cleared his throat.

“The princess shudders in her tower,” he announced, voice lapsing into an English accent. “The dragon guarding her is angry; it’s been two weeks since her last meal.” Max growled.

“A brave band of travelers approaches,” he continued. “The princess leans out her window and calls for help.” Max clasped her hands together and fluttered her lashes.

“The dragon catches sight of them- after two long weeks, they look very tasty indeed. The dragon screams!” Max flicked her hair back and screeched.

“The travelers tremble in their boots. How can they save the princess without becoming dragon dinner?” Dustin glanced at Lucas, who looked at Will, who dug his fingers into Lucas’ shoulder blades, appearing somewhat nauseous.

“Then the travelers remember all they’ve gone through together. Bullies and a demogorgon, the dark place and monster dogs, men in black and psychic girls- all of it, they’ve been through, and they’re still here and they’re still together. This dragon doesn’t stand a chance.”

Eleven felt her smile down to her toes. An eagle circled high overhead. He spread his wings and merged into the last of the golden-brown sunset.

Mike clapped his hands. “Everybody ready?” He asked. They shouted in affirmation. He nodded.

“Alright,” he said, “let’s do this.”